Becoming Begrudgingly Tolerant

Analyzing the Significance of the Emergence and Development of Unitarianism in the Transylvanian Principality during the Mid-Sixteenth Century

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Abstract

The concept of religious tolerance and toleration has been the subject of much scholarly discussion for centuries. In the wake of the Reformation, however, it became a much more practical concept, with Europeans living next door to people perceived as heretics. A certain level of tolerance had to be achieved or else the entire continent would fall into a state of mass violence and disarray. Religious tolerance as a social practice was tested to its limits in the principality of Transylvania during the mid-sixteenth century. The multiconfessional state was home to five competing denominations and somehow managed to establish and maintain a certain level of peace in the region during the age in which religious warfare was rife throughout the continent. This article analyzes the unique emergence of the Unitarian, or anti-Trinitarian, confession in the Transylvanian principality, in order to answer broader questions on the concept of religious tolerance in early modern Europe. After initially outlining current thinking on the concept of religious tolerance, it describes the unique emergence of Unitarianism in Transylvania, aided greatly by political rulers. Challenging the idea of Transylvania being a haven for religious freedom in this time period, the article addresses contemporary debates surrounding the emergence of Unitarianism, namely in the 1567 Debrecen Reformed Synod. It also analyzes legal actions taken to sanction multiconfessionalism in the region, before ultimately situating this study within the broader context of religious tolerance in early modern Europe.

Article

Introduction

Amid the so-called age of religious wars, the principality of Transylvania, located on the periphery of both the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire, appeared to be paving the way towards a more peaceful and civilized Europe.[1] For years, many historians have championed the region as a haven for religious tolerance, enacting policies of co-habitation among different religions that would arrive in other European nations centuries later.[2]

[1] As well as being located on the periphery of these two great empires, the princes of Transylvania also paid annual tribute to the Sublime Porte.

[2] Mihály Balázs, Thomas Cooper, and Judit Gellérd, "Tolerant Country—Misunderstood Laws. Interpreting Sixteenth-Century Transylvanian Legislation Concerning Religion," *The Hungarian Historical Review* 2 (2013): 87.

During the mid-sixteenth century, the principality found itself in the unique position of being a multiconfessional state.[3] Originally dominated by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communities, the Reformation saw a profound change in the region's internal religious loyalties, with the vast majority of the population converting to one form of Protestantism or another in just a few short years.[4] Hence, the myriad of conflicting theologies living in one area could have resulted in widespread violence, but this was not the case. Throughout the early modern period, rulers of the region continued to make it possible for the different confessions to coexist, thus leading many local historians to make the case for Transylvania as the birthplace of religious tolerance.[5] This claim, however, has been challenged with recent thinking around the idea of tolerance and "toleration" in early modern Europe. The Unitarian Church emerged during the mid-sixteenth century and has been at the heart of many arguments for Transylvanian tolerance. The confession held to the doctrine of anti-Trinitarianism—the belief that God was, in nature, one single entity—and was instantly rejected almost everywhere in early modern Europe, with the notable exceptions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Transylvanian principality, enjoying specific legal status in the latter.[6] Unitarianism, which was ultimately expelled from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1658, has endured in Transylvania to this day.[7]

This article assesses the significance of the emergence of Unitarianism in the Transylvanian principality, in order to discuss broader thinking surrounding religious tolerance in early modern Europe. It first outlines current thinking around the concept of tolerance and "toleration," before detailing the emergence of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania during the mid-sixteenth century. The article offers a close study of three Reformed synods, which all took place in the latter half of the 1560s, as a way of analyzing the opposition faced by anti-Trinitarianism in the principality. These texts are crucial to understanding the context of the time, as there are very few surviving texts that track the emergence of Unitarianism in Transylvania and the reaction to it. The synods also help provide a deeper understanding of the practical nature of religious freedom and tolerance in early modern Transylvania. Furthermore, they exemplify that the Reformed Church was extremely reluctant to be tolerant towards the Unitarian Church. Finally, this article discusses a variety of laws that were enacted in Transylvania; some of these laws were key in securing the Unitarianism's status as an official religion in the principality, while others focused on restricting its influence. Ultimately, this article serves as an interesting commentary on the nature of Transylvania's alleged tolerance in the mid-sixteenth century, and indeed on the nature of tolerance in early modern Europe.

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[3] Most states in early modern Europe were loyal to one particular confession, following the legal interpretation of the 1555 Peace of Augsburg that came to be understood by the tag "cuius regio, eius religio."
[4] Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England, and America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), 43.
[5] Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 87.
[6] The denunciation of anti-Trinitarianism in the Christian tradition dates to the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, where Arius' Christology—claiming that the Son did not exist in eternity with the Father—was condemned as heresy.
[7] Mihály Balázs, "Antitrinitarianism," in *A Companion to the Reformation in Central Europe*, eds. Howard Louthan and Graeme Murdock (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 171.

The Concept of Religious "Tolerance" in Early Modern Europe

Previous thinking around the concept of religious tolerance tied its development to "Enlightenment" thinking. It was considered by Whig historians as an abstract ideal, developed by the West in order to combat the barbaric "savagery" of post-Reformation, pre-Enlightenment society.[8] Religious violence was considered in this interpretation of history as the natural impulse of a primitive mind, which had not yet evolved to a better way of thinking.[9] The Western narrative of religious tolerance, then, considered it as an emerging phenomenon, judging societies through an evolutionary lens, as they progress from primitivism, which was marked by religious fanaticism and violence, to a more advanced, harmonious way of living.

Benjamin Kaplan has challenged this view in recent years. Kaplan confronts the concept of the "rise of tolerance" as an enlightened, Western innovation, exposing it as a myth.[10] Kaplan focuses on de-romanticizing the concept, seeing tolerance less as an ideal of the post-Enlightenment elite and more as a gritty compromise practiced by everyday citizens. The legacy of the Reformation had left many communities bitterly divided by faith, with millions of Europeans forced to live among perceived heretics in their own village. As Kaplan describes it, "millions of Europeans experienced the divisions in an intensely intimate, local way."[11] Societies in early modern Europe, particularly multiconfessional ones, needed to respond to the newfound religious pluralism in a pragmatic way, in order to avoid internal rupture and violence. Thus, while the concept of "tolerance" was discussed by the scholars of the day, it was a much more mundane, practical experience for many European citizens. This is particularly evident in the region of Transylvania, which was under threat from the Ottoman Empire to the south. It is therefore vital not to project twenty-first century notions of human rights and personal freedom onto sixteenth-century acts of compromise with one's greatest enemy.

As a case study, this article assesses the development of Unitarianism in Transylvania according to Kaplan's understanding of tolerance and toleration in early modern Europe. With this in mind, it will separate the distinctly modern concept of "tolerance" from the early modern social practice of "toleration." "Tolerance," according to Kaplan, denotes the abstract concept of religious freedom. It has been viewed through early modern history as an emerging trend in society, developed from the minds of visionary, forward-thinking intellectuals and rulers who argued for mutual acceptance.[12] "Toleration," on the other hand, refers to the social practices of ordinary early modern Europeans, begrudgingly adopted in order to achieve a peaceful coexistence with their fellow citizens of different faiths. Toleration is not a glamorous ideal conceived by the elite but rather an act of

[8] Benjamin Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.
[9] For more criticism on Whig interpretations of history and religious tolerance, see the writings of British historian Herbert Butterfield. Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: Norton & Co., 1965).
[10] Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*, 4-5.
[11] Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*, 4-5.
[12] Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*, 8.

necessity practiced among the general populace of multiconfessional communities: "So defined, religious toleration required no 'principle of mutual acceptance,' much less an embrace of diversity for its own sake, as our modern concept of tolerance presumes."[13]

Origins of Unitarianism

Unitarianism, or anti-Trinitarianism, emerged in Transylvania in the 1560s, as a product of the impulses of Biblicism promoted during the Reformation. In this era, public debates were commonplace, with the topic of religion often inspiring lively discourse.[14] The doctrine of anti-Trinitarianism thus came about following disputes within the Reformed community over conflicting understandings of what the Bible taught about the Trinity. The conviction that God was one single entity and not three persons within one Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—had been considered the utmost form of heresy since the fourth century, as it struck the very center of orthodox Christian belief—that of the deity of Jesus Christ. Unitarians initially held the belief that Jesus was certainly inspired by God in his moral teachings, but that he was also, ultimately, merely human. It is important to note, though, that within the Unitarian Church a diverse range of perspectives on Jesus's nature emerged, with certain "adorantist" groups invoking Christ in public worship and other "non-adorantist" groups considering this practice heretical. While this doctrine was naturally met with an intense resentment by some, others warmly welcomed it. This caused a sharp divide among the Hungarian Reformed Church, provoking Trinitarians to gather at synods to clarify their position on "the great mystery of God."[15]

The effectiveness of the emergence of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania can also be linked to the careers of particular individuals. Figures such as Dr. Giorgio Biandrata can certainly be regarded as highly influential, as he was crucial in the development and dissemination of anti-Trinitarian theology and literature surrounding this theology in Transylvania during the mid-sixteenth century. Biandrata was an Italian physician who spent a year in Geneva within the Italian-speaking community. He developed an anti-Trinitarian theology and moved to Poland as physician to the dowager queen, Bona Sforza, of the ruling house of Milan. He then moved to Transylvania in 1563 as court physician to Sforza's daughter, Isabella, and her husband, János Szapolyai. The work of Italian theologians Lelio and Fausto Sozzini must also not go unnoticed. Uncle and nephew, respectively, the Sozzinis were early proponents of anti-Trinitarian theology. Their theology, known as Socinianism, spread throughout the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the sixteenth century and was also embraced by the Transylvanian principality.

One cannot understate the impact Ferenc Dávid and János Zsigmond Szapolyai had on the growth of the movement in the principality.[16] Dávid was the first leader of the Unitarian

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[13] Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*, 8. Along with "toleration," many scholars choose to use terms like "religious pluralism" in order to distinguish between the two terms.

[14] Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism,* 31.

[15] Graeme Murdock, "Multiconfessionalism in Transylvania," in *A Companion to Multiconfessionalism in the Early Modern World,* ed. Thomas Max Safley, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 410.

[16] Balázs, "Antitrinitarianism," 176-177. Sozzini drew his anti-Trinitarian convictions from his interpretation of John's Gospel, claiming that the text only referred to Jesus as *logos* in a metaphorical sense, as he was a messenger of God. Jesus was therefore, in Sozzini's eyes, not eternal. However, it is important to note that, in

Church in Transylvania. Originally opposed to anti-Trinitarian theology, the former Roman Catholic priest, then a crucial figure in the Lutheran and Reformed churches, ultimately became convinced of the doctrine in the 1560s.[17] He agreed upon a Christology that was originally developed by Sozzini and, over the next few years, published a series of Hungarian texts to defend his interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. Like all Reformers, Dávid believed that a correct interpretation of Scripture was at the heart of reform.[18] As well as publishing material, the preacher also engaged in lively theological debates with his former Trinitarian Reformed colleagues.[19] His position as the court preacher of János Zsigmond Szapolyai, the then ruler of Transylvania, was crucial in solidifying the confession's status in the region. Yet, while his involvement was undoubtedly important in the development of the Unitarian Church, Szapolyai's political influence was paramount to the denomination's emergence and survival in the early modern period.

Szapolyai's Role in the Development of Unitarianism in Transylvania

In order to discuss how Unitarianism was able to grow with such strength and vigor throughout Transylvania, it is firstly important to understand the region's socio-political context in the mid-sixteenth century. Szapolyai, the only Unitarian ruler of Transylvania in the sixteenth century, assumed leadership from his father when the region was in a period of great political uncertainty. With the Roman Catholic Habsburg Monarchy to the west and its Muslim Ottoman neighbors to the south, the prince sought to cement Transylvania as an independent state.[20] Mihály Balázs comments on how Szapolyai "attempted to identify Transylvania as a haven for reform in sharp distinction from his Catholic Habsburg rivals."[21] Thus, in his attempt to secure this autonomy, it was crucial for the prince to introduce a policy of confessional pluralism among his citizens, both to promote his own authority and also because any alternative would surely result in widespread chaos and violence. This image of a region in which, by the 1570s, more than four confessions were legally recognized, does indeed appear to be a great example of religious tolerance in early modern Europe. However, Szapolyai's primary motivation was to maintain internal security in the region, in order to establish Transylvania as an autonomous state.[22] Kaplan's theory would suggest that Transylvania was, therefore, similar to many other states in early modern Europe, as their chief concern was to maintain political stability and social peace within the region at all costs and were consequently forced to accept some degree of religious toleration. This challenges the claims of many historians throughout the early modern period who praised the region for its tolerance in a progressive, modern-day, ideological context.[23]

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the denomination's early years of development, there was a consensus among clergy that Christ was still to be adored in worship. This would change dramatically by the 1570s, when further division emerged within the Unitarian community surrounding their Christology.

[17] Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism,* 28-33.

[18] Balázs, "Antitrinitarianism," 178.

[19] Balázs, "Antitrinitarianism," 178.

[20] Márta Fata, "The Kingdom of Hungary and Principality of Transylvania," in *A Companion to the Reformation in Central Europe,* eds. Howard Louthan and Graeme Murdock (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 93.

[21] Balázs, "Antitrinitarianism," 182.

[22] Balázs, "Antitrinitarianism," 182.

[23] Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 87.

When discussing the emergence of Unitarianism in the Transylvanian principality, a strong challenge to the region's alleged embrace of religious tolerance can be seen in the bitter opposition the Unitarian denomination faced from other confessions in the region. While the Church was offered legal protection by János Zsigmond Szapolyai and the Transylvanian diet in 1568, this did not indicate any form of widespread support and acceptance from Trinitarian communities, as the various Reformed synods from the latter half of the decade clearly demonstrate.

Opposition to Anti-Trinitarianism at the Reformed Synods in Debrecen (1567), Nagyvárad (1568), and Szikszó (1569)

> Here is the Lord's command that the things planted, founded and built up by the devil and the Antichrist, i.e., false doctrines, opinions, heresies, traditions, and the inventions of men, must be removed and extirpated from the bosom of the church as dung and vile sins.[24]

The rapid increase in Unitarian believers in Transylvania, fueled by the charismatic leaders Ferenc Dávid and Giorgio Biandrata, provoked a passionate and urgent response from the Hungarian Reformed Church. In a direct response to the emergence of the confession, the Reformed Church convened synods on numerous occasions and in different locations to discuss the Trinity and confirm their own theological convictions.[25] Upon closer examination of these synods, it becomes undoubtedly clear that the Reformed Church had no desire to tolerate the emerging Unitarian movement and, beyond that, were reluctant that any religious rights be extended to Unitarians.

The 1567 Reformed Synod that took place in the Hungarian city of Debrecen, a key center for Calvinist reform, remains one of the most pivotal and longest synods in the history of the Reformed Church, as the documents that emerged from the synod formed the doctrinal basis of the Reformed Church in Hungary. The synod convened on February 24, 1567, bringing together pastors and clergymen from seventeen archdeaconries of Hungary. Members of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church were also invited to the synod but did not attend.[26] Also present was Péter Melius Juhász, a Reformed theologian and superintendent in the Hungarian Church, who engaged in a number of debates with Dávid about the Trinity.[27]

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[24] "Documents of the Debrecen Synod (1567)," in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation,* ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., vol. 3, *1567-1599* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 12.

[25] "Confession of Varadiensis/Nagyvárad (1569)," in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation,* ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., vol. 3, *1567-1599* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 161.

[26] "Documents of the Debrecen Synod (1567)," 1.

[27] Mihály Balázs, *Early Transylvanian Antitrinitarianism (1566-1571): From Servet to Palaeologus* (Baden-Baden: Éditions V. Koerner, 1996), 20. Balázs comments further on how these debates between Melius and Dávid are very important, as they are some of the only surviving documents from the time period that trace Dávid's progression towards anti-Trinitarianism in the mid-sixteenth century.

Doctrinally, the synod is significant as it adopted Heinrich Bullinger's Second Helvetic Confession (1566), establishing it as the Hungarian Reformed Church's official confession.[28] Throughout the proceedings of the synod, the Reformed Church, in addition to considering their official doctrine, outlined vehement opposition of anti-Trinitarianism. A significant number of the discussions were specifically concerned with the growing influence of Unitarian believers in Transylvania, who were labelled by members of the Reformed community as "idolators."[29] Though Debrecen was not located within Transylvania, it was a bordering town, and as a result, it was directly affected by developments in the region. For the Reformed clergy, it was crucial that they intervened in the movement's early years, in order to avoid the heretical teachings of Dávid and Biandrata from gaining traction. The texts from the synod can thus be read as a direct response to the internal divide within the Reformed community, which resulted in the emergence of anti-Trinitarianism in Transylvania.

Members of the synod responded to controversial Unitarian claims about Reformed doctrine. For example, they asserted their convictions about Jesus Christ's deity by denying claims of his inferiority to God the Father.[30] The synod concluded that Sozzini's "monstrous" anti-Trinitarian doctrine was anathema. They condemned his Christology, arguing in their response that God was indeed, as confirmed by the Bible, three Persons within one Godhead.[31] This language is adopted throughout the text of the synod reveals an intense distaste for the theology of the Unitarian Church and an urge to expel the perceived heretics and their "insufferable wickedness" from Debrecen: "We condemn and repudiate every heresy which, according to the testimony of the apostle, is supported by the devil through his instruments from vain desire for glory, quarrelsomeness, schism, envy, arrogance and verbal battles … namely, those of Sabellius and Servetus against the true Trinity."[32] Anti-Trinitarianism was certainly a polemical topic at the 1567 synod, and it confirms the depth of antipathy within the Reformed Church towards their former colleagues who had embraced anti-Trinitarianism: "We repudiate those that call the Father *autotheon* and attribute to the Son some finite beginning and tear away from the Son equal deity and His being one with the Father … we resolved to avoid [the anti-Trinitarians], their false doctrine, and their society like an infectious disease."[33] Ultimately, it is clear that the synod exemplifies the bitter hostility that the Unitarian Church faced in its early years of development, even as it gained legal recognition in Transylvania, and therefore challenges any claims coupling laws about religious rights to attitudes towards religious tolerance in

[28] Balázs, *Early Transylvanian Antitrinitarianism,* 20. From then on, the Hungarian Reformed Church officially labelled itself "Reformed according to the Helvetic Confession."
[29] "Documents of the Debrecen Synod (1567)," 2.
[30] "Documents of the Debrecen Synod (1567)," 6. "They, however, err wickedly who teach that Christ apart from the form of a servant and function of a servant is in some degree inferior to the Father, less than Him and not His equal."
[31] Members of the synod pointed to many passages from the Bible to support their claims, for example in the Gospel of John: "that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I am in the Father." (John 10:38, English Standard Version).
[32] Balázs, *Early Transylvanian Antitrinitarianism,* 11.
[33] "Documents of the Debrecen Synod (1567)," 5-10.

early modern Europe.

In the next two years, there were two more synods within the Reformed Church, in Szikszó and Nagyvárad respectively. In many ways, the sentiments from these two synods are the same as the sentiments at Debrecen in 1567. All three synods brought together clergymen from throughout Hungary and feature a strong, biblical defense of the Reformed faith. At both Szikszó and Nagyvárad (the latter now Oradea in modern-day Romania), it is made explicitly clear that the synod convened, at least in part, as a direct response to the continued popularity of Unitarianism in Transylvania. At both synods, it is also evident that there was no embrace of tolerance towards anti-Trinitarianism among the Reformed Church.

The synod at Szikszó convened on January 6, 1568, mere weeks before the Transylvania diet passed the edict at Torda (Turda in modern-day Romania), which granted rights of conscience and worship to the Unitarian Church. The synod features a doctrinal statement, which clarifies the Reformed Church's position on the sacraments of baptism and communion, as well as their position on polygamy, but most pertinently their understanding of God's Triune nature and character. In total, there are twenty-four statements made rejecting anti-Trinitarianism and the affirmation of the Trinity became a key marker of identity for the Reformed Church in this region.[34]

The full proceedings from the synod are full of avid rejections of the Unitarian faith, considered by the Trinitarian Reformed clergy to have been "recalled afresh from hell."[35] There is a continued reliance on Scripture as the basis of the arguments, for example, referring to Isaiah 43:10 in order to emphasize the Triune God's unchanging character and the eternal nature of the Son: "Before me no God was formed, nor shall there be any after me."[36] Unitarian theology is addressed on numerous occasions, often referred to as nonsense: "Therefore, they who deny the unity and trinity and coeternal nature and deity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit impiously speak nonsense."[37] While the Debrecen synod is more detailed and contains more specific calls for action in response to the emergence of Unitarianism, it is clear that the clergy at Szikszó harbored radical intolerance towards their Unitarian neighbors.

The synod reconvened in the town of Nagyvárad in 1569. Once again, a number of Hungary clergymen were present, including Péter Melius Juhász. The synod's opening title reads, "The consensus of the ministers in Hungary professing and defending the orthodox faith against Franciscus Davidis, Georgius Blandrata and the Transylvanian Unitarians."[38] It is also interesting to note that the members of the synod did not consider themselves the aggressors, rather expressing the necessity of "defending" the Reformed faith against doctrinal innovation.

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[34] "The Synod at Szikszó (1568)," in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation,* ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., vol. 3, *1567-1599* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 147.
[35] "The Synod at Szikszó (1568)," 148.
[36] "The Synod at Szikszó (1568)," 149.
[37] "The Synod at Szikszó (1568)," 150.
[38] "Confession of Varadiensis/Nagyvárad," 162.

The document from the synod features a statement of faith that once again leans heavily on God's Triune nature. It contains six theses, all pertaining to the character of God, and four overtly professing belief in a Triune Godhead consisting of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[39] The subsequent portion of the synod's document, entitled "Confessions of the Pastors," lays out their particular abhorrence of the "horrendous blasphemy" of the Unitarian Church, "who deny that God the Father is the eternal Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."[40] In the final line from the synod's document, the Hungarian pastors write in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, further emphasizing their Trinitarian stance.[41]

The texts emerging from these synods serve as a reminder of how bitterly anti-Trinitarianism emerged in Transylvania as a the result of a polemic split within the Reformed community. The Unitarian Church defined itself as the only truly Reformed religion, solely reliant on Scripture, in stark contrast to what they considered the polytheistic and non-Biblical Reformed and Roman Catholic confessions. Similarly, the synods exemplify how the Hungarian Reformed Church defined themselves within the context of their opposition, claiming that they were the only true, Biblical religion. This self-definition as a Trinitarian Church in opposition to the Unitarian Church is unique to Transylvania in this period and polemic rhetoric between all sides accompanied a legal regime that extended rights to different churches.

The results of the Reformed synods of 1567 to 1569 strongly suggest that many members of the Reformed community desired that rights be removed from the Unitarian Church.[42] Beyond that, the synods also reflect a severe distaste towards the Roman Catholic community in Transylvania: "[God] commands that we weed out and uproot them, so that no trace of Papist defilement remains in the heart and soul of man."[43] Hence, the three synods examined in this article provide a challenge to the concept of Transylvania as a land where a language or principle of "tolerance" was advocated in any modern-day understanding of the term. Despite decrees from the ruling diet, there was clearly resistance to the idea of tolerance and practice of toleration among Hungarian speakers, both in Transylvania and in Hungary. Rather than confirm an attitude of tolerance in the region, these synods de-romanticize the time period and remind the reader that there was essentially no embrace of religious tolerance by the Hungarian Reformed Church towards Unitarianism. Toleration in the sixteenth century was, ultimately, a reluctant compromise practiced among hostile religious factions in the region.

However, while the Unitarian Church endured widespread persecution throughout Europe, it was granted specific legal rights that allowed it to grow and develop in the Transylvanian principality. The reason for this unique legal status was partly due to the desire to maintain

[39] "Confession of Varadiensis/Nagyvárad," 162-163.
[40] "Confession of Varadiensis/Nagyvárad," 166.
[41] "Confession of Varadiensis/Nagyvárad," 167.
[42] "Documents of the Debrecen Synod (1567)," 11-12.
[43] "Documents of the Debrecen Synod (1567)," 12. This quote is preceded by an allusion to the first chapter of Jeremiah, in which the prophet is commanded to expel heresy from his nation in the name of the Lord. This provides the biblical foundation for the Reformed Church's argument.

social peace and to pursue a policy that bolstered support among the elite of different faiths for Transylvania as an autonomous state but also due to the support of the Unitarian prince, János Zsigmond Szapolyai, whose distinct religious policies allowed the Church to flourish in the region.

Laws Concerning Anti-Trinitarianism in Transylvania in the Sixteenth Century

By 1568, Transylvania was divided into Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Unitarian, and Eastern Orthodox communities, as well as being home to other faith communities, most notably Jewish, Muslim, and Roma. Naturally, tensions between these groups of believers were high, and when debates surrounding the Trinity intensified in the 1560s, so too did questions about the extent to which religious freedom should be sanctioned. This resulted in the Edict of Torda in 1568, which has been directly linked with the emergence of Unitarianism in the region and is also central to the claims of numerous modern historians that Transylvania was a "pioneer" of religious tolerance.[44]

Most of the laws passed during János Zsigmond's reign focused on the challenges of religious pluralism. In order to achieve a peaceful resolution to the issue of multiconfessionalism, the diet granted a significant amount of religious liberty to preachers in the region, which was practically unheard of throughout the continent. Perhaps the most influential law passed by the prince was the 1568 Edict of Torda, in which it was announced that ministers in the region were to preach the Gospel "according to their understanding of it," allowing space for a variety of conflicting interpretations of Scripture to coexist.[45] This edict was one of a number of laws about religious rights passed during the middle decades of the sixteenth century, which in one sense seem to portray the region as uniquely tolerant. Later laws, for example, permitted the sharing of church buildings among confessions in order to conduct worship services, while the 1571 Diet of Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mures) further solidified confessional pluralism in the region, as it ensured that "no one, neither preacher nor listener, shall come to harm on account of his confession."[46] These laws laid the groundwork for religious pluralism to flourish in the region without any violent disturbance for a number of centuries.

One law—the 1570 Edict of Medgyes (Medias)—appears to contradict the prince's ideology and the Edict of Torda. It states: "We will carry out Your Majesty's order concerning the newly emerging heresies and their initiators; that Your Majesty considers honoring God and respecting his royal dignity of foremost importance, therefore he does not tolerate such blasphemy and heresy in his realm, but rather scrutinizes them and punishes both

[44] Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 87. See, for example, the writings of Earl Morse Wilbur, who saw Transylvanian Unitarianism as evidence for religious tolerance in the region. Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism,* 165. Dennison, on the other hand, reads these laws as a mere façade concealing Dávid's and Szapolyai's true motivations to push their Unitarian agenda. "The Synod at Szikszó (1568)," 147.
[45] Szilágyi Sándor, ed. *Erdélyi Országgyûlési Emlékek. Monumenta Comitialia Regni Transsylvaniae* (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1877), 2:343, cited in Graeme Murdock, "Turda, 1568: Tolerance Transylvanian Style," in *A Sourcebook of Early Modern European History: Life, Death, and Everything in Between*, ed. Ute Lotz-Heumann (New York: Routledge, 2019), 236.
[46] Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 89.

their authors and propagators in order to avoid an even greater divine wrath upon us."[47] While some historians attribute this law as a move to prevent anarchy in the region, Balázs sees this interpretation as a projection of modern-day concepts of religious tolerance onto a sixteenth-century context. Rather, he claims that the law appears to have been put in place to prevent newly emerging groups from gaining influence in the region.[48] This reading of the law aligns with Szapolyai's ideology; it de-romanticizes these sixteenth-century laws, distancing them from any modern concepts of religious tolerance.

It is important, then, to note that, by legally recognizing multiple confessions in one region, Szapolyai was enforcing the requirement for Transylvanians to practice toleration. However, his emphasis at each diet was on the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura*—that the Bible was God's infallible and inerrant Word and therefore the sole authority on all matters. This principle is drawn from verses of Scripture, such as 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."[49] It can therefore be concluded that the edict was intentionally excluding non-Protestant communities, namely the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. This can be determined by the wording of the terms of the edict. The emphasis on reading Scripture in the vernacular, as well as the concept of preaching the Gospel according to one's own interpretation, are core Protestant beliefs. Thus, the edict was indirectly discriminating against the non-Protestant communities. The edict also concerned communities of believers and did not grant religious freedom to the individual. Given the diverse nature of Transylvania in the sixteenth century, as well as the pressure placed on the region from external forces, it is no surprise that cooperation and respect between these primary confessional groups would be at the forefront of János Zsigmond's religious policy.[50] Toleration was, at this point, in the best interests of all parties, in order to establish a peaceful coexistence, and therefore it was a practice motivated entirely by self-interest, rather than mutual goodwill and respect, let alone any principled interest in tolerance.

By examining these laws, one can see the unique status of the Unitarian community in the principality of Transylvania. Szapolyai's legal actions granted the Church a space to grow and develop in the region unlike anywhere else in Europe. The Edict of Torda gave the Church a strong foothold in the region's internal affairs, as the first Unitarian schools were founded within a few years.[51] Moreover, one must also consider the number of laws introduced by the subsequent Catholic rulers, which seemed to limit the status of anti-Trinitarianism in the region and thereby challenge Transylvania's alleged tolerance.

When Szapolyai died in 1571, he was succeeded by the Catholic noble István Báthory.[52]

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[47] Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 89-90.
[48] Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 91.
[49] King James Version.
[50] Fata, "The Kingdom of Hungary and Principality of Transylvania," 115.
[51] Murdock, "Multiconfessionalism in Transylvania," 411.
[52] Murdock, "Multiconfessionalism in Transylvania," 184. In another act of compromise, it can be seen that the Protestant elite welcomed Báthory in the principality, despite his Roman Catholic faith, because of his anti-

Báthory's prejudices against the Unitarian Church are clearly reflected in the laws passed by the Transylvanian diet during his reign. Similarly keen to secure political peace and autonomy in the region, however, the prince was unable to reverse the laws enacted by his predecessor. It is also important to note that maintaining peaceful multi-confessionalism in the region helped Báthory in the lead up to his election as the king of Poland. His successful history of maintaining peace in Transylvania encouraged the Polish nobility to think he would maintain their own multiconfessional settlement.[53] Despite this, as Balázs explains, "he took every opportunity to act against Antitrinitarians."[54]

Báthory was never subtle in his opposition of the Unitarian Church. From the early days of his rule, he made it clear that Lutheranism was the most acceptable form of Protestant worship.[55] Ferenc Dávid, as well as his fellow Unitarians, was dismissed from Báthory's court when he came to power, and consequently the preacher's influence in the region started to diminish. At the 1572 Diet of Torda, the prince accepted the late János Zsigmond's decree recognizing the region's confessional pluralism, but simultaneously introduced a new ban on any further doctrinal innovation: "if found guilty of preaching a different faith from that of the late King, he should be excommunicated or otherwise punished according to his deserts."[56] This law strengthened Báthory's hold on the region's affairs, while also maintaining multiconfessional peace in the region. As well as this, the Catholic prince placed tighter restrictions on the ability of Unitarians to print and distribute literature.[57] Thus, compared to the freedom they enjoyed under Szapolyai, one can see that attempts were made to limit any further intellectual development of anti-Trinitarian ideas within the Unitarian Church. While it remained an official confession in the region, any further development was deliberately curtailed by laws limiting "doctrinal innovation." Returning to Kaplan's definition of the term, it can be seen that Báthory's treatment of the Unitarian Church did not come from any abstract ideal of religious liberty, but rather a necessity to maintain peace in the region while conceding the most limited religious rights to Unitarians possible. Transylvanian tolerance was a grudging affair developed in a very specific political and social context.

The aforementioned ban on doctrinal innovation came into effect when Ferenc Dávid was accused of the crime in 1579, which came about as a result of the splitting of the Unitarian Church into two factions. The original group continued to adore Christ in worship, in accordance with Sozzini's Christology, while the other group did not.[58] This group defined themselves as non-adorantists, as they held to the conviction that Christ was merely mortal and, as such, did not merit any worship or praise. This theological practice was referred to by Transylvanian Trinitarians as "the very wicked and detestable view that Christ should

Habsburg convictions. Once again, this shows a willingness to tolerate (i.e., endure and bear with) the perceived enemy in order to achieve a common goal.

[53] On Bathory's career in Transylvania and Poland, see Felicia Rosu, *Elective Monarchy in Transylvania and Poland-Lithuania, 1569–1587* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[54] Balázs, "Antitrinitarianism," 184.

[55] Balázs, "Antitrinitarianism," 184.

[56] Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism,* 59.

[57] Balázs, "Antitrinitarianism," 184.

[58] Murdock, "Multiconfessionalism in Transylvania," 412-413.

not be adored or invoked," since it opposed the foundational truths of orthodox Christian doctrine.[59] Ferenc Dávid became convinced of non-adorantism, and despite attempted interventions by some of the principality's most notable Unitarian scholars, he would not concede.[60] He held strictly to the Old Testament commandment that no one should be worshipped but God alone and believed that no further command had been given since then.[61] Sozzini, on the other hand, remained "adorantist" throughout his life, as he claimed that, although it was not necessary, it was not heretical to invoke Christ in worship.[62]

Báthory's law indeed constrained the Unitarian superintendent in Transylvania to maintain "adorantist anti-Trinitarianism" as the core Unitarian doctrine, and as a result, Dávid's accusation and trial for doctrinal innovation reveal further inaccuracies in the suggestion that Transylvania was a haven for religious tolerance throughout the early modern period. Rather, it becomes clear that Báthory was doing what was necessary to maintain internal political and social stability in the region, which continued to see angry rhetoric from all sides against the views of rivals, and nothing more. In the following centuries, non-adorantists would continue to be subject to persecution on the basis of these laws passed by Báthory in the mid-sixteenth century.[63] However, despite their contested place and internal divisions, the Unitarian Church that emerged from this period has remained in the Transylvanian principality to this day and enjoys a unique popularity in many towns and villages throughout the region.

By the end of the sixteenth century, Unitarianism was no longer a catch-all term. The polemic split that resulted in two main factions—adorantists and non-adorantists, who became known as "Sabbatarians"—had led to questions about the nature of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania. Every anti-Trinitarian could agree theologically that God was a single entity, but beyond that there was no further consensus. At first, arguments arose over whether or not one should worship Jesus Christ or not; later, divisions arose over whether or not one should share in the sacraments of baptism and communion or not. These intense debates continued for centuries. Despite this, it was a beneficiary of the unique multiconfessional laws passed by János Zsigmond Szapolyai in mid-sixteenth century. These laws allowed the Church to emerge in the principality unlike anywhere else in Europe, and while at first glance this appears to portray the region as a tolerant place, upon deeper investigation it can be seen that the laws were primarily adopted in order to allow Transylvania to maintain peace within its own borders and to bolster the political authority of the elected nobles who ruled the nascent state with precarious autonomy.

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[59] Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism,* 39.

[60] "Biandrata had called for Sozzini to come to Transylvania to assist him in dealing with the turmoil caused by Ferenc Dávid's espousal of non-adorantism … The Italian theologian then practically lived together with Dávid from November 1578 until April 1579 attempting to persuade Dávid to change his position." Balázs, "Antitrinitarianism," 189.

[61] See, for example, Matthew 4:10b: "for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve." King James Version.

[62] Balázs, "Antitrinitarianism," 189. See, for example, John 5:22-23, where Sozzini claimed Jesus sanctioned adoration of Him in worship: "For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son: That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him." King James Version.

[63] Murdock, "Multiconfessionalism," 415.

Thus, toleration was in some ways forced upon the Transylvanian people from above, through the laws passed by Szapolyai and Báthory, while also being practiced by the general populace below with state laws that directly forbade any violence towards preachers in legal churches, in order to maintain peace in the region.

Conclusion

This article has shown that Transylvania's famed attitude towards religious tolerance was, in many ways, no different to the attitudes of most other European states. Throughout the early modern period, Hungarian historiography has portrayed the region as one far more advanced than its neighbors, striving for the ideals of peace and coexistence amid an age of brutality and warfare. Beyond this, many scholars have often pointed directly to the emergence and development of the Unitarian Church in the region to strengthen their nationalist arguments. Yet, in analyzing the confession's emergence in the region from the Reformed Church, it seems clear that, although the region stood out for its unique acceptance of anti-Trinitarianism, religious pluralism in Transylvania was not based on any ideological concept. Rather, as historian Graeme Murdock explains, Transylvanian multiconfessionalism revealed itself as "a set of pragmatic rather than ideological responses to the changing character of European states and societies after the Reformation."[64] This attitude is reflected in the legal developments within the region during the mid-sixteenth century, which forced Transylvanian citizens into the social practice of toleration, regardless of their opposition of conflicting doctrine. No single denomination enjoyed a popularity significant enough to dominate the region's affairs, and so while many Transylvanian citizens hoped that confessional pluralism would be a temporary measure, they were willing to do what was necessary and compromise with their enemies, for the sake of internal stability.[65]

Hence, it is erroneous to presume twenty-first-century concepts of individual religious freedom onto the legal and cultural actions of sixteenth-century Transylvania.[66] It has been shown in the Reformed synods of 1567, 1568, and 1569 that there was no embrace of religious tolerance among the Reformed community, despite laws passed by the diet. The motivation for practicing toleration in the region was largely governed entirely by self-interest of the state's elite of differing faiths. Opposing denominations needed to reach a reluctant common ground of Biblicism in order to achieve peace while vehemently disagreeing about interpretation of the Bible. Although various diets and rulers sanctioned religious pluralism during the early modern period, they also found ways to restrict the influence of minorities, as was the case with the Unitarian Church in Transylvania.

The growth of the Unitarian Church is a fascinating case study; its origins, development, and polemical inner division provide key insights into the political and cultural dimensions of toleration in early modern Europe. The confession would continue to be the subject of much dispute for centuries, but ultimately it was clear to the citizens of Transylvania that maintaining the mundane social practice of confessional pluralism was the best means to

[64] Murdock, "Multiconfessionalism," 415.
[65] Murdock, "Multiconfessionalism," 415-416.
[66] Balázs, Cooper, and Gellérd, "Tolerant Country," 90.

achieve peace during the period. Rather than any ideological standard, the multiconfessional state of Transylvania was built on "grudging and hard-fought compromises."[67]

[67] Murdock, "Multiconfessionalism," 394.