



Philosophy of Religion

The Philosophical Legacy of the 16th and 17th Century Socinians: Their Rationality

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ABSTRACT: The doctrines of the Socinians represent a rational reaction to a medieval theology based on submission to the Church's authority. Though they retained Scripture as something *supra rationem*, the Socinians analyzed it rationally and believed that nothing should be accepted *contra rationem*. Their social and political thought underwent a significant evolutionary process from a very utopian pacifistic trend condemning participation in war and holding public and judicial office to a moderate and realistic stance based on mutual love, support of the secular power of the state, active participation in social and political life, and the defense of social equality. They spoke out against the enslavement of peasants, and were the first Christians to postulate the separation of Church and state. The spirit of absolute religious freedom expressed in their practice and writings, 'determined, more or less immediately, all the subsequent revolutions in favor of religious liberty.'⁽¹⁾ The precursor ideas of the Socinians on religious freedom later were expanded, perfected, and popularized by Locke and Pierre Bayle. Locke's ideas were transplanted to America by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson who implemented them in American legislation. The rationality of the Socinians set the trend for the philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment and determined the future development of many modern intellectual endeavors.

Several religious and intellectual movements today claim the right to the heritage of the religious group, the Socinians, that developed in Poland and in Transylvania in XVIth and XVIIth centuries. The claimants vary from the Christian churches to the atheistic or deistic Humanists and each of them usually selects a specific set of Socinian views ignoring the rest. The Socinians were known under various names such as the Polish Brethren, Antitrinitarians, Arians, and Unitarians. The name Socinians was used mostly in western Europe.⁽²⁾ They were eventually expelled from Poland in 1660 to fulfill King John Casimir's religious vow to the Holy Virgin to avenge the denial of the Divine Trinity by "heretics." Such a denial was deemed an act most blasphemous according to Catholic ideology.

Historical Outline

At the roots of Socinianism are the theological ideas transplanted from western Europe and the social ideas borrowed initially from the Anabaptists and Moravian Brethren.

Discussions at the meetings of the secret society of Catholic scholars in Cracow since 1546 had, as a purpose, reform of the church and included the works of Michael Servetus.⁽³⁾ Several visitors from abroad including Adam Pastor from Holland and Lelio Sozini from Italy transplanted the Antitrinitarian ideas and the doctrines of the Radical Reformation. About the middle of the XVIth century a variety of Antitrinitarian sects emerged that were separated from the Helvetian church. They called themselves Christians or Brethren, hence the Polish Brethren, and also the Minor Reformed Church.

Their opponents labelled them after the old heresies as Sabellians, Samosatrinians, Ebionites, Unitarians, and finally Arians. The most brilliant period for the Polish Brethren was between 1585 and 1638 with the center at Raków which won the name of the Sarmatian Athens. They founded a world-renowned school in 1602. Its rector until 1621, Jan Crell, codified the ethical system of the Brethren. Their famous printing press filled Europe with treatises written in Polish, Latin, Dutch, and German. They were well praised and read by people like John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Isaac Newton, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. They represented a small number but held high ethical values. The Polish Brethren lasted in Poland for about 100 years from the time when Peter of Goni_dz delivered his credo at the Calvinist synod in Secemin on January 22, 1556, to the death of Samuel Przypkowski in 1670. Socinians made an outstanding contribution to Polish literature and had the most advanced and pioneering ideas in the social, political, and religious fields.⁽⁴⁾ They left about 500 treatises largely unexplored and still waiting to be examined.

They were inspired by a sincere application of original Christianity to personal, social, and political relations. Their ideology was characterized from the beginning by:

1. Propagating freedom of religious thought;
2. The principle of applying reason to the interpretation of the Scriptures, the Revelation, and theological matters in general;
3. Absolute tolerance of all creeds;
4. The struggle for social equality among people. At their first synod, the Polish Brethren settled the matter of freedom of conscience: "Everyone has the right not to do things which he feels to be contrary to the word of God. Moreover, all may write according to their conscience, if they do not offend anybody by it."⁽⁵⁾ Protestant and Catholic reaction termed freedom of conscience and tolerance propagated by the Socinians as "that Socinian dogma, the most dangerous of the dogmas of the Socinian sect."⁽⁶⁾

Rationalism of the Socinians

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

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

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

From the 1630's this Socinian thesis against natural religion was questioned by later Racovian Socinian theologians and with time their new views became recognized as the classical Socinian doctrine. They attempted now to provide philosophical arguments for natural religion and develop a scriptural exegesis to support this view. Traditional views among orthodox Catholics maintained that:

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

The Protestants maintained that:

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

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

The new Socinian theory was disclosed in 4 treatises:⁽⁷⁾ *Brevis disquisitio* (1633) and *De iudice et norma controversiarum fidei* (1644) by Joachim Stegmann Sr., *Animadversiones apologeticae ... in ... J.A. Comeni ... libellum* (1660) by Samuel Przypkowski, and *Religio naturalis* (1670) by Andrzej Wyszowaty. The main tenets of the doctrine can be summarized as follows: The norm in religious matters is God, but today He does not speak to us directly. The Scripture is left as his Word and is considered only as a norm of faith just as a legal code is a norm for the law—though the actual judgment is pronounced by the judge. Someone has to interpret the Scripture, but it cannot be the Holy Spirit as is maintained by the evangelicals. Some Socinians now demanded a rational argument and not faith. Also, invoking the authority of the church or the pope is baseless, since this authority in turn must itself be somehow justified. This would lead to a vicious circle: the church authority is justified from the testimony of the Scripture and the Scripture's veracity in turn is affirmed by the church authority!

The solution which the Socinians proposed was as follows:

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

Hence, we must conclude that human reason becomes the sovereign authority, and that it also judges the provenience of the Scripture and its interpretation.

The remaining issue to be clarified concerns the understanding of the truths defined as "above reason" (*supra rationem*). Socinians used it with two meanings. However, neither agreed with the traditional, orthodox usage. First meaning: The mysteries of religion are the truths which cannot be reached without Revelation, though the human mind is capable of understanding them. As an example, the Socinians gave the mystery of the salvation of mankind by Christ. The mystery was mentioned in a vague and enigmatic way in the Old Testament. It ceased to be a mystery and became truth "above reason" when Jesus revealed and explained it. Second meaning: Truth "above reason" is a truth that can be reached by independent human reason, but reason is not able to explain it completely. It is perceived as something in accordance with reason and in a certain way, necessary. This is exemplified by the truth of God's eternity. This truth is often treated as something inconceivable, however, reason convinces us that it is not impossible, and God even becomes a necessity as the first cause of all causes.

These types of truths "above reason" constitute the content of natural religion accepted by the Deists. Of course, such a concept of religious mystery is quite different from the traditional one. One of the Socinian writers, J. Stegmann, went further in his rationality and claimed that the concept of religious mystery is not necessary in the Christian religion, and the term truth "above reason" becomes inadequate. Everything that is taught by a religion is measured by human reason. He agrees that certain religious truths cannot be understood completely, but the same can be said about natural ones. Everything, matters pertaining to nature, to God and religion, remain within the reach of human reason. Hence we can know and understand the truths exposed in the Scripture which are necessary for eternal salvation. Thus, the divine matters contained in the Scripture are not "above reason." We may, however, say that some truths are "above reason," (*supra rationem*) since we are not able to know them by natural means— i.e., without the Revelation.

This was an extremely radical position, and it was not accepted among the Socinians— it was simply too radical for the Christian world. So later Przyppkowski and Wiszowaty used the term "above reason" in the strictly Socinian meaning. Orthodoxy was not concerned with the mysteries of religion mentioned by the Socinians such as the eternity of God, the creation of the world, or even the resurrection of the dead. This specific rationality of the Socinians was not acceptable to the orthodox mentality and was dramatically and erroneously evaluated by Pierre Jurieu, the French Huguenot.

The Fate of the Socinian Doctrine

As we have seen since the 1630's certain later Socinian writers present their doctrine as remaining in all aspects in accordance with human reason and impute to the human mind the obligation to decide how to understand Revelation and the privilege of deciding about the veracity of the Revelation itself. From a rational point of view these declarations are subconscious mystifications — the Socinians had never intended to submit to critical evaluation the authenticity of the Christian Revelation contained in the Bible since it was for them a self-evident fact. Their attitude vis-à-vis Scripture was not critical but apologetic.

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

Its positive role was expressed by the fact that: 1. it considered the moral content of religion as its center and minimized the importance of dogma, reducing at the same time almost to zero the ritual side of religion; 2. it propagated "religion in accordance to reason" (religio rationalis) and traced such a model of the relationship between the Revelation and reason such that reason was to be an absolute hegemon. These two postulates became adopted in the ideological program of the Deists. The negative effect of the Socinianism was that: in the opinion of the ideologues of the Enlightenment, the Socinians were supposed to undertake the final attempt to rationalize Christianity. According to them it was the most ambitious and the farthest reaching attempt that ended in a fiasco. They deemed unconvincing the Socinians' attempts to rationally interpret the behavior of the Biblical Yahweh and to show that it can be understood in the categories of humanistic morality. The Socinians, standing on the position that Jesus is identical with the Messiah promised by the Old Testament, also had to defend the authenticity of the Old Testament Revelation and consequently of its cruel God of Joshua and David with the God of Gospels. Hence, they claimed that there arose some deep inadequacies resulting from the impossibility of including the moral image of the Biblical Yahweh into the system of religion in which moral values were considered the highest.

From such an analysis of the Socinian doctrine, which they considered a failure, the thinkers of the Enlightenment drew two conclusions: The first one was formulated by Pierre Bayle who claimed that religion is in its essence irrational and that any attempt to reconcile it with the demands of rational thinking, is futile and doomed to failure. Later this conclusion led the most radical thinkers to the conviction that the irrationality of religion is not a proof of its supernatural origin, but on the contrary, it constitutes a proof that it is a product of human mind. The second conclusion served to build Deistic religious conceptions, namely, the failure of the Socinians does not prove that they undertook an impossible task, but that they chose the wrong approach. The Socinians are right in claiming that religion is in agreement with reason, and also with the humanistically understood morality. If the Christian doctrine does not agree with these postulates, it is evidence against them and not against religion. In order to understand this, one has to go further and break the ties with the Old Testament. Then Jesus will cease to be the Messiah, and instead he will become still more meritorious of reverence as the one among very few moral leaders of humanity who have shown the ways to return to the pure sources of natural religion that is as unchanging as is God, the Creator of Nature.

Notes

(1) F. Ruffini quoted in Anson Phelps Stokes *Church and State in the United States*, introduction Ralph Henry Gabriel, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1950), Vol. 1, p. 115.

(2) Marian Hillar, *From the Polish Socinians to the American Constitution*, in *A Journal from The Radical Reformation. A Testimony to Biblical Unitarianism*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1994. pp. 22-57.

(3) Marian Hillar, The Case of Michael Servetus (1511-1553) — *The Turning Point in the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience*, (Lewiston NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997).

(4) F. Ruffini quoted in Anson Phelps Stokes *Church and State in the United States*, introduction Ralph Henry Gabriel, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1950), Vol. 1, p. 115.

- (5) Stanislas Kot, *Socinianism in Poland. The Social and Political Ideas of the Polish Antitrinitarians*. Translated by Earl Morse Wilbur, (Boston, 1957). p. XXII.
- (6) Pierre Jurieu, Protestant professor of theology at Rotterdam, cited by H. John McLachlan *Socinianism in Seventeenth-Century England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 9. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704), bishop of Meaux, called the universal tolerance "cette théologie de l'impiété des sociniens." *Oeuvres Complètes de Bossuet*, ed. F. Lachat (Paris: Librairie de Louis Vivès, 1862-1863), Vol. XVI, p. 151.
- (7) Zbigniew Ogonowski, editor, *Myśl ariańska w Polsce XVII wieku. Antologia tekstów*. (Wrocław, Warszawa, Kraków: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1991). pp. 263-342.