

Queen Isabella: The Roots of Tolerance

[Picture of crown of Hungary] This crown, by rights, should sit on my son's head and, as I have worn it for him in his stead, on mine.

[Picture of J. S.] John Sigismund—János Zsigmund, named for his father and my father—who gathered around him in his court the most liberal thinkers, the learned in those ideas on theology, statecraft and philosophy now raging throughout Europe and finding sanctuary in Transylvania.

Where did he learn to appreciate those arts? Who taught him that it was good and proper to foster and respect diversity in opinion, tolerance in belief and habit? And from whom did my dear son learn to consider the needs and rights of the people to whom he was bound? To value education and inquiry, scholarship and reasoned debate; to appreciate lively conversation and surround himself with the thinkers and philosophers of our time; to recognize the need to serve his people by establishing schools and hospitals, if not from me, and his tutors, and the people who made up our world? Some of them were fleeing the university and court worlds of the West for questioning the Trinity—sometimes quite literally fleeing for their lives, for, after all, had not Michael Servetus burned in Geneva, on the direction of Calvin himself for heresy, for rejecting the concept that God can—must—be Triune?

Some accuse me of wanting this crown and its power for myself; they reproach me for trying too hard to hold János Zsigmund back, for keeping him too long in leading strings. And perhaps they are right. What mother wouldn't protect her sickly son as best she could? The constant colds and debilitating bouts of illness—exacerbated, surely, during our years of exile, as we wandered from that dreary, destitute holding in Slovakia to my brother and mother in Poland to family estates near L'viv . . . —and then the epilepsy on top of that!

Yet I assure you that everything I ever did was done to preserve my son's patrimony as best I could—with the aid of true friends and despite the machinations of forces from without . . . and false friends from within—and to return János Zsigmund to his rightful inheritance: Transylvania, a land of surpassing beauty, fertile soil, rich resources . . . and fiercely independent peoples.

Our people are a stew of Székler and Magyar and Saxon, of Wallach and Jew, and of those Roma who suddenly appeared from the south and east—and, beyond them all, distant but important, our overlord, protector, and friend in the times of greatest need (and, yes, to his advantage), the Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent—a truer friend than most Christian princes and clerics, to whom I owe this crown, and my son's throne, and quite probably our very lives—and his own policy of toleration. Each ethnic group holds to its own customs and beliefs, living side by side with divergent customs and opinions: Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Orthodox, Jews, and Muslims—and the growing number of Antitrinitarians.

And where did I learn to welcome diversity? To tolerate difference of belief? Recall the world in which I grew up: Luther's Protestant Reformation burst upon Europe at the time of my birth; the free, independent commune of Anabaptists at Münster was wiped out—every man, woman and child—when I was 16. My own dear husband, János Zápolya [picture], put men to death for “heretical” beliefs. And in the year of János Zsigmund's birth, an 80-year-old woman, Katarzyna Weiglowa, was burned at the stake [picture] in my home city of Kraków for apostasy, for refusing to renounce her non-trinitarian view that Jesus could

not be the son of God. So how did I learn to respect the right of the individual to determine what is best for her and his soul?

I come from a long line of strong women [pictures] who, in every generation, have appreciated the best minds of their times (and have had to assert their rights to rule the lands entrusted to their stewardship), whose mothers wisely educated all their children, girls and boys, in the politics, philosophies, theology and arts of the times. My mother, Bona Sforza [picture], was arguably the unifying force in Polish politics and the architect of a strong, centrist state during the reign of her husband, my father King Zygmunt. From my mother, and the tutors she hired, my sisters and brother and I learned statecraft, law, administration, theology, and the philosophy of the humanists (indeed, I carried a much-thumbed copy of Erasmus with me to Transylvania and throughout the years of my exile). I learned that women must be part of the political decision-making process and the administration of the state, as they will be governed by those decisions and policies.

But let me not discount my father's [picture] willingness to tolerate—indeed embrace—multiplicity of custom and belief or the diversity of his kingdom, our Poland, the most religiously pluralistic society of its time, another stew of varying ethnicities, languages, beliefs and customs: Polish and Lithuanian Catholics; Eastern Orthodox Slavs and Armenians; humanists brought from Italy in my mother's entourage when she married my father and those invited over the years to educate us in the latest thinking and to seek asylum; students returning from the hotbeds of debate in Wittenberg and Geneva, bringing with them the new teachings of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli; Jews; Tatar Muslims ... name the belief, the ethnic group, the philosophy, and you would find it at the court of my father and mother. One of my father's advisers once counseled him to emulate Henry, eighth king of England of that name, in denouncing Luther and upholding the Catholic church. My father replied that Henry could do as he wished, but as for him, Sigismund, he "begged leave to be the king of both sheep and goats."¹

.....

All along that dreary, sorrowful way from our lovely White City in the South [picture] into exile in the North and all during the years of our exile, to keep ourselves from going mad with grief and poisoning our souls with bitterness, my son and I played The Game: "When we return, when the crown is restored to us, when the land is ours again, what kind of rulers shall we be? What would be the best way, the very best possible way, to rule a kingdom such as ours? We could play this for hours, arguing out the fine points of statecraft, of jurisprudence, of military and political strategy, but always with two questions, equally to be considered: Will it work? and Is it good? It was a game that we would play for five long years of exile, while Jan Zsigismund grew from a slender lad of eleven to the passionate convictions of sixteen."²

One of the questions we as rulers had to confront, deliberate and decide upon was the matter of religion, for rulers are expected to determine the confession and profession of the people in their lands and to enforce conformity. We talked endlessly about possibilities; we weighed the options and ramifications: Catholic and Lutheran, Calvinist and Antitrinitarian. And out of that Game a Dream was born. For we asked ourselves: Why should we have to choose for everyone in our realm? Indeed, what right did we

¹ Wilbur, Vol. I, p. 309.

² Gibbons, p.

have to proclaim “This you will believe on pain of punishment”? What did we know of God that was any better, any truer, than the faith of any other person in our lands? Why try to force all into the same mold? Why not let each one worship God in the way that seemed best? What if we made a land filled with churches of many faiths, among which the people could freely choose that worship that satisfied their souls?

Is it any wonder then that, as soon as János Zsigmund and I were recalled by our people from exile to take up our crown and lands and stewardship, I issued in our name a declaration of universal toleration, expressly permitting the people of our realm to “each observe the faith of his preference with new or ancient ceremonies, permitting freedom of choice to each according to preference, provided no harm be done to any, that neither the followers of the new religion are to do despite to the old, nor are the old in any way to injure the followers of the new . . .”?³ Is it any wonder that this declaration was renewed in every year that remained to me of my life or that my son János Zsigmund used this as the basis for the edict that he later published, after I had departed this world?

This then is YOUR heritage and your mission: to keep alive and foster the spirit that believes each one should worship the way that seems best, and each one should search for the truth and be supported in that search. You then continue the Dream begun all those hundreds of years ago in a little corner of Europe, where the only Unitarian king in history once reigned, my dear son, János Zsigmund.

* * * * *

Appendix I: [To be read by Jennifer Munro, Reading]

Text of declaration of universal toleration, June 1557⁴:

In as much as we and our most Serene Son have graciously consented to the urgent petition of the Lords of the realm that each observe the faith of his preference with new or ancient ceremonies, permitting freedom of choice to each according to preference, provided no harm be done to any, that neither the followers of the new religion are to do despite to the old, nor are the old in any way to injure the followers of the new, therefore the Lords of the realm, in order to promote concord among the churches and to dispel the controversies occasioned by the rise of the evangelical doctrine, have decreed the calling of a national council where devout ministers of God and other eminent members of the nobility may engage in discussion of sincere doctrine that under God dissensions and diversities of religion may be overcome.

³ Wilbur, Vol. II, p. 17; Bainton, Ch. on Isabella Jagiellon;

⁴ Szent Ivanyi, Alexander, *Freedom Legislation in Hungary, 1557-1571* (New York, 1957), quoted in Bainton 1977.

References

- Bainton, Roland. *Women of the Reformation: From Spain to Scandinavia*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1976. Kindle books version used, thus no pagination available for references.
- Gibbons, Rev. Dr. Kendyl. "Crowns and Dreams." Handout by Rev. Ruth Gibson for "Our Transylvanian Roots," adult education course at Unitarian Universalist General Assembly 1998.
- Szent Ivanyi, Alexander. *Freedom Legislation in Hungary, 1557-1571*. New York, 1957. Quoted in: Bainton, *op. cit.*
- Wilbur, Earl Morse. *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and its Antecedents*, Vol. I. Boston: Beacon Press, 1945, 1972, and online: <http://www.sksm.edu/research/publications/historyunitarianism1.pdf>.
- . *A History of Unitarianism: In Transylvania, England and America*, Vol. II. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, 1977, and online: <http://www.sksm.edu/research/publications/historyunitarianism2.pdf>

[The following timeline will appear in the Order of Service:--yes, it fits]

Time Line: Isabella Jagiellon Zápolya & Related European Events

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| 1519 - Jan 18 | birth of Isabella, firstborn of King and Queen of Poland |
| (1535 - Jun | Catholic forces attack the Anabaptist commune in Münster, Germany, massacring the inhabitants) |
| 1539 - Feb | marriage to János Zápolya, King of Hungary |
| (1539- Apr 19 | death of Katarzyna Weiglowa, burned at the stake in Krakow) |
| 1540 - Jul 7 | birth of János Zsigmond Zápolya (John Sigismund) |
| 1541 | Isabella, her infant son (acknowledged King of Hungary), her advisors and court remove from Buda to Transylvania on the advice/orders of Sultan Suleiman |
| 1551 | exiled from Transylvania;
Ferdinand of Austria becomes King of Hungary |
| (1553 | death of Michael Servetus, burned at the stake in Geneva) |
| (1555 | Peace of Augsburg between Catholic and Lutheran forces establishes principle of " <i>Cuius regio, eius religio</i> "— "Whoever rules the region, his religion shall be practiced there.") |
| 1556 - Oct | Isabella and János Zsigmond recalled to Transylvania, re-established as queen regent and elected king |
| 1557 - Jun | Isabella and her son issue the Declaration of Universal Toleration |
| 1559 - Sep 15 | death of Isabella |

[I will put together a Powerpoint Presentation with the appropriate pictures ,or have a file of pictures, ready on a flash drive. I will need the computer-projector. (should I bring my own laptop, or can the computer be left after Nate's Story for All Ages?) I will also need a CD player. Does the church have one?--I don't have a portable one.]