

Laelius and Faustus Socinus, Founders of Socinianism: Their Lives and Theology Part Two

MARIAN HILLAR

Theology of Faustus Socinus

Faustus Socinus wrote his major theological works while staying in Switzerland and Italy. His works written in Poland were an elucidation of his theological doctrines. He spoke against: the chiliastic doctrine which was accepted by many Christians and Christian groups — Ebionites, Marcionites, Apollinarists, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and many Anabaptists; the non-adoration of Christ which was supported by Francis Dávid and Palaeologus; the second baptism; and the radical social doctrine of some Polish supporters. The core of his doctrines coincided with the doctrines developed by the Polish Brethren: 1. Anti-Trinitarianism or negation of the traditional concept of the Trinity. 2. Unitarianism or negation of the preexistence of the Son (Jesus). 3. The concept of redemption through moral acts. 4. The concept of radical dualism, i.e., radical difference between God and man. 5. The mortality of Adam before his fall. 6. The concept of religion as a practice of ethical principles, i.e., the conviction that moral commands such as the Sermon on the Mount must be practiced. 7. The conviction that man is able to develop the will to follow Christ and thus achieve salvation. 8. Opposition to the mysticism which required a special illumination to know religious truth. 9. The conviction that man's natural reason is sufficient for understanding and interpreting the Scripture. 10. An empirical position that all our knowledge comes from sensual experience: "For as Philosopher said, nothing is in the mind, that is in the intellect, which would not be first in the senses" (*Nam, ut dictum est a Philosopho, nihil est in mente, sive in intellectu, quod non prius fuerit in sensu*).¹

¹ Faustus Socinus, *De statu primi hominis ante lapsum disputatio*, in *Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum (BFP)*, ed. Andreas Wiszowaty, Amsterdam, 1656-1668, Vol. 2, 296.

The difference in theology between the Polish Brethren and Socinus included Socinus's rejection of anthropological pessimism, which the Brethren inherited from the Lutheran-Calvinist tradition, and rejection of the second baptism.

The Knowledge of God and Authority of the Scripture

For Socinus the only way to know God was through the Scripture itself, that is from the revealed word of God. Thus he negated any possibility of a natural knowledge of God either from an innate idea or from the contemplation of nature. Religion is based on revelation; it comes from faith and thus there is no natural religion: *religio res naturalis nequaquam est.*² As evidence he quoted the recent discoveries of new territories where there were no religions. Moreover, this is implicitly affirmed by the Scripture, and if it were not, religion would not have any value. The revelation comes from the will of God in a historical process.³

Socinus argued that there could be four reasons why a Christian might doubt the authenticity and absolute authority of the Scripture: 1. if the authors are not trusted; 2. if authors are not identified; 3. if one thinks or knows with certainty that the text is corrupted; 4. if there are contrary testimonies. Socinus eliminated all these doubts, arguing that the Apostles could not contradict the precepts of Christian truth, and that Christians must believe unconditionally in the sacred Scripture by adhering to the text, that is to its philological interpretation. For those professing other religions one has to demonstrate the preeminence of Christianity. And this he attempted to do through his understanding of religion: namely, religion for Socinus was essentially moralistic and consisted of promises and precepts. According to Socinus, one finds in Christianity the most splendid and greatest promises as well as the best precepts. If the truth of a religion were indisputable, there would be no difference between the good ones and the bad ones and there would be no reason for rewarding or punishing. On God's part, religion is revelation; on man's part, religion is faith and conviction that one has to follow the divine precepts and that the promises will be fulfilled.⁴

Anti-Trinitarian Christology

In his first treatise written in 1562, *Explicatio primae partis primi capituli Evangelii Joannis*,⁵ Socinus gave a different interpretation of the words of John (John 1:1-3) that negated the Trinitarian dogma. Traditionally, this chapter was interpreted on the basis of Greek philosophy and religion, assuming the existence of a second person, the Son of God or Word or Logos, as the cosmic entity which preexisted with God the Father and was united with Him by the same substance. At a certain time the Son of God became "flesh," that is a human being, Jesus, while still being God.

Socinus's argument against such interpretation rested on its inconsistency with other scriptural passages. In the interpretation of both Laelius and Faustus the

² Faustus Socinus, *Commentarius in Epistolam Joannes Apostoli primam*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 237.

³ Faustus Socinus, *Praelectiones theologicae*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 537.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Faustus Socinus, *Explicatio primae partis primi capituli Evangelii Joannis*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 74-88.

“beginning” does not refer to the beginning of things as in Genesis, but must be understood as the beginning of Jesus’ teaching. The view that the Word (Logos) existed before time as a cosmic being has been accepted in traditional theology under the influence of Platonic philosophy and is not derived from the Gospels. In the Gospels the word Logos (Word) means the historical Jesus, the man, the son of Mary who was crucified and not an eternal cosmic Logos. John, by calling him Word (Logos), meant that Jesus was proclaiming the word of God, i.e., God’s will. Laelius and Faustus also stated that it is equally nonsensical to accept the literal meaning of the expression “and the Word was God.” Socinus emphasized that in the Scripture the term God was frequently used in a metaphorical sense to stress the rank and importance of the person so called. The Scripture calls angels, rulers, and judges “gods” and the term “God” in John 1 should be understood in this way. John is using this term for Jesus Christ not in the literal sense as equal to God, but to stress the dignity of Jesus who had a mission to build a new world, since “all things were made by him.” Thus, Jesus was a man, though foreseen in God’s plans; he was born at a given historical time and given a mission. Because of this he rightfully deserves adoration.

Equally untrue is the contention that Christ atoned for human sins. Socinus discussed this question in his later writings. The dogma of atonement and satisfaction is, according to Socinus, contrary to reason and a sense of justice. The true role of Jesus was to demonstrate to people how to be saved. By dying on the cross Jesus proved that no sacrifice should prevent people from fulfilling God’s commands. The resurrection confirmed the truthfulness of Jesus’ teachings. Thus the resurrection is the central feature of his message. He confirmed by this his message and asserted that if people follow his teaching they would be raised from the dead. And in this sense only Christ can be called Savior. After his resurrection God gave Christ full power over the world and people and in this sense again he can be called God.

The true understanding of the scriptural expression “the Son of God” applied to Jesus is not that he was born by the power of the Holy Spirit, but that his “likeness” to the Father consisted in three functions, knowledge, immortality, and power:⁶ 1. Jesus knew human minds and hearts as no other prophet or angel. 2. Jesus was the only and the first man to rise to immortality. Though the Scripture mentions Enoch and Elijah who were taken up to heaven, they were not raised from the dead and there is no indication that they were made immortal. 3. Jesus has power over human minds and bodies. He also commands good and bad spirits and judges men and rewards them according to their merits or sins with eternal life or punishment. But Jesus’ power extends only over the people belonging to the church. And the church is understood as the people who have any kind of knowledge about Jesus, even those who deny him.

⁶ Valentinus Smalcus, “De Christo,” in *Epitome Colloquii Racoviae habiti anno 1601*, eds. Lech Szczucki and Janusz Tazbir, Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1966, 35-39.

The expression “Holy Spirit” does not denote the third person of one God. The Holy Spirit is not a person or a cosmic being; it is the power of God and the effectiveness of His actions. This power has the property of sanctifying people.⁷

The Doctrine of Justification

The doctrine of justification as taught by the reformers was based on the doctrine of original sin developed by Augustine and viewed man from a pessimistic perspective, especially the doctrine propounded by Calvin. The reformers believed that man was not capable of any act which would have a justifying value in the eyes of God. They preached that salvation was possible only because Christ by his death on the cross atoned for human sins by placating the anger of God. To be saved man must have a strong faith in the redeeming role of Christ’s martyrdom. Faith, however, is not a personal merit of man, but an unmerited gift of God dependent on God’s grace which is given only to those who are selected arbitrarily. Thus free will is a fiction. And without the grace of God men are irrevocably doomed; only the elect ones receive the grace of God without any merit on their part.

Socinus’s doctrine of justification was quite different. There is no original sin as described in traditional Catholic and Protestant theology.⁸ Adam’s transgression burdened Adam alone. Man was not immortal but mortal by nature and his nature is the same today. His nature was simple and inexperienced, without any knowledge or special intelligence. Also, he was not in possession of an original righteousness. Man was created free of any moral determinism, but only with a free will. The evil in the world is a fact from which man should draw conclusions with respect to his moral conduct. Man can only win immortality by his life in Christian faith. Outside the Christian doctrine there is no possibility of salvation. If there is a spark of revelation in every religion, the true and complete revelation is the one given by God through Christ. There is no reason to believe that the sin of one man destroyed the ability to follow justice in all men. If that ability is not perfect, it is because of acquiring a habit of wrong actions. Equally absurd is the doctrine of predestination, especially as propounded by Calvin, according to which God destined some to eternal life in glory, while others are predestined to eternal punishment. Also, Socinus considered absurd the view of Augustine who said that evil is a product of human free will, but the achievement of good is conditioned upon receiving the undeserved grace of God. Christ saved us, however, by announcing to us the divine will and teaching us what we are to do in order to obtain eternal life and overcome death. He showed by the example of his life and his death the way in which we can obey God’s will and follow His precepts, and he assured us of the truthfulness of his message by his miracles.⁹

⁷ Valentinus Smalcus, “De Spiritu Sancto,” in *Epitome*, 42.

⁸ Faustus Socinus, *Praelectiones Theologicae*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 541.

⁹ Faustus Socinus, *De Jesu Christo Servatore*, in *BFP*, Vol. 2, 121. Valentinus Smalcus, “De homine,” in *Epitome*, 45-55.

There were two objections to Socinus's views: 1. This doctrine did not explain divine justice requiring a punishment for sins. 2. Man as a sinful creature is unable not only to obey the divine commandments, but also to imitate Christ.

Socinus responded with a concept of divine justice totally different from the Catholic tradition so pictorially depicted by Dante and Calvin's doctrine. Divine justice is not distinct from divine mercy — His justice is His mercy. God as the creator of justice cannot be judged according to the human idea of justice. One cannot talk about God's anger and His hostility toward men. Divine justice does not require any expiation or a sacred victim. Still God does not leave iniquity unpunished, but this is not due to sins and errors, but to obstinate malice in some men. And such punishment is not a result of divine justice but of free divine will.¹⁰

As to the second objection, Socinus responded that man is not able to follow Christ and live without sin in the same measure as Christ did, but what is required is that man put himself in the same path and follow him in the same quality of virtue. This view derived from the accentuation of the humanity of Christ and the moral dignity of man. Socinus was aware that human imperfection will not allow us to imitate Christ. But it is sufficient to have faith in Christ, that is, to believe in his promise and obey his precepts. This was an active faith, a unity of faith and works, which remained in accordance with the postulates of humanism. From this Socinus derived a new concept of Christian religion as a celestial doctrine which teaches men a true way to achieve eternal life.¹¹ It is experienced from the Scripture, interpreted by reason, and implemented in practice by obeying the evangelical precepts. To this is related the problem of free will. Free will survived Adam's fall. The idea that man is deprived of free will is absurd, because then there would be no religion since it is nothing else but an effort to obey God.¹²

Socinus posed a general question: is it possible to assert that there is free human will, while believing that from the beginning of time God knew all human deeds and thoughts? The answer that Socinus gave is that divine foreknowledge is incompatible with human free will: 1. Our justification by God is not the result of the sanctity of our lives or of our innocence (*causa impulsiva* and *causa effectiva* — impulsive cause and effective cause).¹³ It is not so because before time began God decided to save people on condition that they believe in Christ. 2. Faith in Christ is an unmerited gift of God because no one given the opportunity to believe in Christ deserves that gift.¹⁴ At first this seems to be in agreement with the reformers, but closer analysis shows that it is not. 3. Belief in Christ is given not to people arbitrarily selected but to all people to whom the gospel is taught.¹⁵ 4. Faith which justifies us does not

¹⁰ Faustus Socinus, *De Jesu Christo Servatore*, in *BFP*, Vol. 2, 124.

¹¹ Faustus Socinus, *Summa religionis christianae*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 281a.

¹² Valentinus Smalcus, "De praedestinatione," in *Epitome*, 55.

¹³ Faustus Socinus, *Tractatus de Justificatione*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 601-628.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, 602b.

¹⁵ Faustus Socinus, *Tractatus de Justificatione*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 603b; *De Jesu Christo Servatore*, in *BFP*, Vol. 2, 240a.

consist in asserting a conviction that the words of Christ are true. Such a faith may be possessed by those who are disobedient to God. Justifying faith consists not only in the confidence that God will fulfill the promise of eternal life made through Jesus Christ, but it also necessarily involves obedience to God's commands. This obedience is not a result of faith. This justifying faith is obedience to God.¹⁶ 5. The belief that Christ's promises will be fulfilled arises in us from our free will, because the decision to believe is ours.¹⁷

The Origin of Faith

As to how faith arises, Socinus suggested a constant struggle between reason and inclination. Reason counsels us to follow justice even to our disadvantage, while inclination leads us to whatever is most advantageous. Thus it depends on our free will whether we act justly even to our disadvantage or whether we do what is to our immediate profit even though we understand we should not act that way. The one who decides to follow the counsel of reason is easily led to believe that God who rewards the just and punishes wrongdoers exists. One who follows his inclinations cannot reach this conviction or can only do so with difficulty because such a conviction is inconvenient for his designs. Thus the cause and foundation for faith is man's desire and tendency to do what is right and to avoid what is unjust.¹⁸

The grace that God gives to people is the teachings of Christ which contain, in addition to strict moral commandments, the promises of the reward most desired by people, namely, an eternal life of happiness.

The process of the emergence of faith is presented by Socinus in entirely naturalistic terms without supernatural intervention. Such an intervention would completely destroy human merit and would make salvation dependent on the Creator's whim. This intervention nevertheless appears at a certain stage. But according to Socinus this supernatural assistance does not reduce the degree of the personal responsibility of man.

The commandments of the New Testament to imitate Christ are just and consonant with reason. But their fulfillment requires such a degree of heroism and self-denial that it seems that they overreach the natural capacities of man. The hope for a reward of eternal life which will be achieved by obedience may not be enough to persist in the fulfillment of the commandments. Thus some certitude is needed in order for hope to persist and it is created in human hearts by the power of God's spirit. This grace is granted to those who not only accept the reward as true but who also are prepared to reject wickedness and to be wholly obedient to the gospel's commands and persist in pious endeavor.¹⁹

¹⁶ Faustus Socinus, *De Jesu Christo Servatore*, in *BFP*, Vol. 2, 234a.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 240b-241.

¹⁸ Faustus Socinus, *Assertiones theologicae de Trino et Uno Deo*, in *BFP*, Vol. 2, 455-457. Valentinus Smalcus, "De homine," in *Epitome*, 45-55.

¹⁹ Faustus Socinus, *Assertiones theologicae de Trino et Uno Deo*, in *BFP*, Vol. 2, 456b.

Negation of Divine Foreknowledge

Socinus discussed the negation of divine foreknowledge in his work *Praelectiones theologicae*²⁰ while he considered the doctrine of predestination.²¹ The doctrine that God has the unerring knowledge of all future contingencies, i.e., those things that could happen but may not happen, obviously because of future human acts, is based, according to Socinus, on three arguments: 1. If divine nature inherently includes unerring foreknowledge, it would be impious to think otherwise. 2. It is scarcely probable that things would be different, although they could be different if that were God's will. 3. It is supported by the Scripture.

Those who accept divine foreknowledge claim that free will is incompatible with divine prescience. It follows that God is unable to grant free will to man. This opinion is impious and contradictory to what they say themselves — that the first man had a free will before his fall.²² Socinus presented two reasons his adversaries could offer in support of the first argument: 1. For God everything that exists is present because He Himself is beyond time and exists in eternity where nothing is earlier or later. This reasoning, however, cannot be accepted, since time, whatever theologians say, has a past and future. Time did not begin with the creation of the world; only the meaning of time began with the creation of the sun and stars. Therefore, even for God past, present, and future exist. Consequently God knows things past, present, and future as such. Socinus refers here to the notion of absolute time as did Gassendi later in the seventeenth century and Newton after him. 2. It can be said that God is omniscient, that is that if He did not know something, He would not be omniscient. But even this argument is not convincing, because God knows everything, but only those things that are capable of being known. Future contingencies are not in this category.

To disprove the second argument Socinus put it in a different form — partisans of divine foreknowledge claim that divine foreknowledge is incompatible with free will. Socinus said, we claim the same. The question, however, arises: Which is more probable — that God refuses free will to man to preserve divine foreknowledge, or that He granted free will and renounced foreknowledge?

If we accept that there is no free will in man, there results the absurd situation that God is the cause of human sins. There is nothing absurd, however, in maintaining that not all is known to God by unerring foreknowledge. Is it not enough that God by His unlimited power, wisdom, and knowledge governs and directs everything, so that God will always direct whatever man does to His glory? Conversely, acceptance of the thesis of foreknowledge makes God a passive witness of all events, removing Him from the constant care of people, and the immediate direction of the affairs of the world.

²⁰ Faustus Socinus, *Praelectiones theologicae*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 544b-550a.

²¹ Valentinus Smalcus, "De praedestinatione," in *Epitome*, 55-65.

²² Socinus referred to Calvin's *Institutiones*, I. cap. XV.8.

Essential Truth, Divine Justice

Socinus stressed obedience to the commandments of the gospel and by doing this he somewhat devalued religious dogmas and religious knowledge. But the devaluation is not complete, because without some knowledge of religion there is no belief in Christ, and belief in Christ, however it may be understood, is a condition of salvation. Socinus was convinced that only belief in a small number of religious dogmas, the so-called “essential truths,” is required for salvation. Only acts contrary to the gospel’s message make salvation impossible. Essential truths are generally those without which faith in Christ and the fulfillment of his promises are impossible.²³ Those truths are clear and commonly understood. Even views totally erroneous and noxious, such as belief in the Trinity and in predestination, do not rule out salvation, though they make it difficult. These views Socinus presented during his theological seminars in Raków in 1601-1602. In the same lectures Socinus formulated his views concerning hell.²⁴ He was of the opinion that expressions such as “punishment of hell,” “eternal condemnation,” and “eternal suffering” are metaphors Jesus intentionally used in order to adapt his doctrine to the mode of thinking of those whom he taught. It must be assumed that not all shall rise on the day of the last judgment. The thesis that the impious shall be left to their fate, that is, eternal death or nonexistence, and the obedient and just shall be called to eternal glory, can be allowed on the following grounds: 1. Justice requires that the wicked be punished. 2. People who know that they will not suffer after death will persist in their sins.

The first argument Socinus justified thus: It seems unjust that the wicked will not be punished; it would be even more unjust if God, who made man mortal, would then make him immortal in order to make him suffer. It is more acceptable that the impious should rise in the day of judgment, see the glory of God, and then die forever. The latter view, however, seemed to Socinus less likely than the previous one, i.e., that their fate is simply nonexistence.

The second argument Socinus dealt with is: They are in error who think that people may be forced to reform and repent by the threat of hell. It is possible that such a threat would be a deterrent if punishments were visible and could be tested visually. He who will not reform because of a reward as magnificent as eternal life, offers little hope of being restrained by the fear of punishment. He who will not believe in a reward will not believe in a punishment.

Socinus’s Rationalism

A. Socinus represented a strict empiricism. He commented: 1. Men have no innate or natural idea of God though such a view is widely accepted. This view originated from the widely spread “news” about God which was transmitted from generation to generation. The news arose in turn from the original revelation of God. And those

²³ Valentinus Smalcus, “De Deo,” in *Epitome*, 16.

²⁴ Valentinus Smalcus, “De statu mortuorum usque ad diem ultimum,” in *Epitome*, 88-102.

people who did not receive the “news” cannot even guess the existence of God. 2. There is no possibility of knowing God through the study of nature.²⁵ A disciple of Socinus, Christopher Ostorodt, succinctly formulated these assertions in a work published in 1625 in Raków:

The fact that people have some knowledge of God comes neither from their nature nor from the contemplation of the works of creation. It comes from the “news” about God: God revealed Himself to men from the beginning. Those who did not receive the “news” have no idea about any deity as the conviction of this is provided by examples of some peoples in the New Indies...Thus man cannot know anything about God and His will except what He Himself revealed, that is in the external manner.²⁶

3. The knowledge of God does not come from any form of inner illumination or inspiration. Whatever is in the mind or intellect comes from empirical perception (*Nam, ut dictum est a Philosopho, nihil est in mente, sive intellectu, quod non prius fuerit in sensu*).²⁷ 4. Thus, the only source of knowledge about God can come from transcendental revelation. “Now then, because religion is by no means a natural thing...but if it is true then revelation should be something divine” (*Nam cum religio res naturalis nequaquam sit...sed si vera est, patefactio est quaedam Divina*).²⁸ This applies to Christ as well, who as a human being was elevated to divine dignity and had to acquire the knowledge about God in a manner consistent with his human nature. The way Socinus visualized this was that Christ before he started his mission remained for some time in heaven as is indicated by John 13:3.

B. The role of reason. Socinus deduced from this that if man cannot obtain knowledge of God by natural means but only through divine revelation, then human minds not only may grasp it and interpret it independently, but it is essential that they should, since otherwise revelation would be unnecessary. “For wherever there is present divine revelation not only is human reason able to apprehend divine things, but it is necessary that it should; otherwise, clearly, divine revelation would be in vain” (*Nam ubi divina patefactio adest, non solum humana ratio res divinas percipere potest, sed ut percipiat necesse est; alioqui frustra plane esset patefactio illa*).²⁹ To be understandable, revelation must be given in a form and expressed in categories accessible to the human mind. Revelation must follow the principles of reason. If a religious doctrine contains teachings contrary to reason, this doctrine is untrue in those points and contrary to reason. Such untrue views and teachings must be absolutely rejected. But Socinus was not a rationalist; rather, he understood reason as common sense and not as critical reason. However, in this way Socinus rejected the authorities previously responsible for the tenets of religion — the Church and

²⁵ Faustus Socinus, *Praelectiones theologicae*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 537.

²⁶ Quoted by Z. Ogonowski in preface to Andreae Wissowati, *Religio rationalis*, translated by Edwin Jêdrkiewicz, Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1960, XII.

²⁷ Faustus Socinus, *Lectiones sacrae*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 296.

²⁸ Faustus Socinus, *Commentarius in epistolam Joannes Apostoli primam*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 237.

²⁹ Faustus Socinus, *Tractatus de Ecclesia*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 343.

tradition. To Socinus, there was on earth no greater authority for man than his own reason. Socinus stressed that revelation must be assessed by human reason.³⁰

C. Verification of divine revelation. The question then arises: How do we know that Scripture, which allegedly contains the words of God, is divine revelation, since we cannot assess it either by natural reason or by contemplating nature?

Catholicism appeals to the primary testimony of the Church, whose authority is a guarantee of the authority of God's word, a position first expressed by Augustine: "I would not believe in the Gospel if it were not for the authority of the Church" (*Ego Evangelio non crederem nisi me commoveret auctoritas Ecclesiae*). Protestantism points to the "internal testimony of the Holy Spirit" (*testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*). Socinus rejected both the authority of the Church and the supernatural inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He taught what might be called today a naturalistic solution to the question of authority. Socinus argued: 1. There are people who, though dubious of the authority of Scripture, agree that the Christian religion is true. He thought it easy to prove for them the authenticity of revelation. It was enough to refer to his philosophical argument given in *De Sacrae Scripturae auctoritate*. 2. There are also those who reject this opinion and either doubt that it is the true religion, or simply think it is false.

The second variant involves two classes of people: a. Those who think that there is, or that there may be, a true religion. In this group are non-Christians. For those who believe that there is a true religion, he suggested a comparison of Christianity with other religions, which should prove its superiority and excellence. b. Those who think that there is no true religion at all. This group encompasses atheists. For those who do not recognize any religion or reject belief in God, Socinus counseled the use of rational arguments but concluded that there are no arguments that would prove, without doubt, that God exists and that Christianity is a true religion.

Socinus proposed the following arguments for the existence of God and His revelation:

a. Argument from events demanding free will. Socinus postulated the existence of God from free will though he did not give any specific argumentation. "We have, however, little doubt that this argument may not produce great difficulty, particularly if reason is led not so much by nature and its necessary effects as by free and voluntary events remaining beyond the necessary order of nature and which are daily observed on the earthly globe" (*Quamquam vero minime dubitamus, quin hoc [i.e., the existence of God] haud magna negotio effici queat, maxime si rationes ducantur non tam ex natura ejusque necessariis effectis, quam ex liberis voluntariisque eventibus extra necessarium naturae ordinum, qui in orbe terrarum conspecti sunt et*

³⁰ Faustus Socinus, *De Sacrae Scripturae auctoritate*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 273; *Praelectiones theologicae*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 537-539. Socinus's views on natural religion and the differences in the question between Socinus and late Socinianism, beginning with John Crell, are discussed by Z. Ogonowski in his *Socynianizm a Oświecenie. Studia nad myślenie filozoficzno-religijn arian w Polsce XVII wieku (Socinianism and the Enlightenment)*, Warsaw: Polska Akademia Nauk, 1966, 78-104.

quotidie conspiciuntur).³¹ The basis for this argument is an assertion about absolute human free will. Socinus rejected the concept of divine foreknowledge (*praescientia divina*). God does not know the future actions of man. Otherwise there would be no free will and there would be no possibility of either rewarding the righteous or punishing the wicked since this requires a conscious choice between good and evil. The free will of man is part of divine providence in governing the world and maintaining harmony.³² But Socinus admitted that such an argument may work only for someone who already knows about the existence of God and seeks some verification.

b. Historical argument. The previous argument is inconsequential; therefore Socinus postulated another one he considered superior. First one has to prove through historical documents that Jesus existed, then that he died on the cross, and finally that he performed miracles. The rest of the arguments follow his tractate *De Sacrae Scripturae auctoritate*.

c. Argument from the moral sense. But Socinus was fully aware that none of these arguments for proof of the existence of God are convincing: "It is certain that whoever considers religion a human invention and ridicules it, thinking that it is vain to expect God's reward for just deeds and punishment for wicked deeds, will also ridicule miracles, reducing them to natural causes."³³ What therefore is the reason why some believe in God and revelation while others do not, if rational arguments are not decisive? Christian churches explain it by postulating the action of God's grace. Socinus rejected this explanation and tried to solve the problem by postulating that the recognition of God's existence and of the true nature of Christian religion depends ultimately on a moral position. Socinus asserted that every man has the capacity to differentiate between good and evil or at least to recognize the importance of following righteousness. And this is, according to Socinus, a form of the inner word of God.³⁴ The reason in us pushes us towards the choice of righteousness, but impulse pushes us towards what is our immediate desire. Thus our choice depends on free will and those who follow righteousness are inclined to accept the existence of a divine power controlling the world.³⁵

Thus Socinus equated religion and belief with morality. Religion is not a matter of reason but of faith. The will and moral attitude decide on their acceptance. Religion is not self-evident; if it were, there would be no difference between good and evil. In such a case both the evil and the righteous would be convinced about the truthfulness of religion and there would be no possibility of committing evil or good and hence of punishing or rewarding. The choice between accepting religion and rejecting religion

³¹ Faustus Socinus, *De Sacrae Scripturae auctoritate*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 273.

³² Faustus Socinus, *Praelectiones theologicae*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 545.

³³ Faustus Socinus, *De Sacrae Scripturae auctoritate*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 274.

³⁴ Faustus Socinus, *Praelectiones theologicae*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 539. Valentinus Smalcus, "De homine," in *Epitome*, 45-55.

³⁵ Faustus Socinus, *Elenchi sophistici*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 637. Valentinus Smalcus, "De homine," in *Epitome*, 45-55.

depends on the will and moral position and not on rational arguments. The reward of immortality promised by the Gospels is so desirable that there is no one who would not do even more than required by Christ's commands, if it were certain that the promises of Christ are true. Because reward is not so certain, wicked people, or those who do not love virtue for itself, prefer not to believe in its reality and possibility. Those who have virtue easily believe in God. Thus the fact that religious truths are not indisputable makes it possible to distinguish between the wicked and the just.³⁶

Impact on Future Development

Socinus's doctrine became in the beginning of the seventeenth century the official doctrine of the church of the Polish Brethren — called Socinians. In the generation that followed Socinianism underwent modifications. More stress was put on the rational elements of the doctrine; it was emphasized that Socinianism was a "rational religion." The view of Socinus that there was no natural religion was abandoned — it was thought that this thesis devalued the role and function of reason. From the end of the second decade of the seventeenth century Socinians were proclaiming the opposite view. Later as attacks on Socinianism in Poland and in western Europe grew and as both Catholics and Protestants branded Socinianism the most dangerous of heresies, Socinian theologians began to modify other aspects of the doctrine, probably to make it less shocking and more acceptable to Christian opinion.

In the second half of the seventeenth century the view of the Socinians on Jesus and the atonement was given a more moderate form.

In 1658 the Diet of the Commonwealth of Poland introduced a resolution prohibiting anti-Trinitarianism under penalty of death. Anti-Trinitarians had to convert or leave within three years. This was an act of fanaticism, but Poland still was officially tolerant toward other Protestant churches after this resolution. In 1648 the English Parliament passed the ordinance penalizing anti-Trinitarianism by death (the Draconian Ordinance). In 1658 a resolution of the Diet of the Commonwealth brought an end to the anti-Trinitarian church in Poland. The majority of the Socinians accepted Catholicism; a minority emigrated, mostly to Transylvania. The intellectual elite settled in Holland where they found support among sympathizers, mostly remonstrants. There they continued their publishing activities — the result of which was the publication in Amsterdam between 1665 and 1668 of a monumental work in several folio volumes, *Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum quos Unitarios Vocant (The Library of the Polish Brethren Called Unitarians)*. The *Bibliotheca* included writings of some leading theoreticians and theologians of the Socinian movement beginning with the complete works of Socinus.

The vigorous propaganda conducted by the Polish Brethren and their sympathizers in western Europe during the seventeenth century, which continued even after their exile from Poland, exerted a strong effect, especially in Holland and Great Britain. In

³⁶ Faustus Socinus, *De Sacrae Scripturae auctoritate*, in *BFP*, Vol. 1, 279. Zbigniew Ogonowski, *Socinianism and the Enlightenment*, Chapter 1, "Criteria of Truth of Christianity According to F. Socinus," 15-77.

addition, the harsh anti-Socinian edicts and the numerous theological tracts branding this doctrine as the most pernicious of the heresies excited curiosity and interest about the sect. Socinianism once expelled from Poland was never reborn as a large church and its doctrines were not accepted in their entirety. However, many of the ideas that it proclaimed were accepted by sympathizers among independent theologians of liberal tendencies, ideas such as the following:

- the conception that religion should follow the principles of reason;
- the unitarian concept of God;
- the irenic idea linked to the doctrine of essential truth;
- the view that salvation is possible in all Christian churches on condition of fulfillment of the moral commandment of the gospel;
- the principle of religious tolerance and church-state separation to which Socinus's successors, beginning with John Crell, devoted a great deal of attention.³⁷

These and similar ideas were shared by thinkers in religious centers, and orthodox theologians attributed the main source of all these ideas to Socinianism. Hence at the end of the seventeenth and in the course of the eighteenth century, they branded as Socinianism all religious opinions that gravitated toward liberal and rationalistic opinions. On the other hand, Socinianism (so compromising to orthodox theologians) had a positive effect on the ideologists of the Enlightenment. It was stressed that Socinian doctrine had embraced concepts of great worth for a rationalist and humanistic tradition. Therefore, almost all leading representatives of the intellectual movement who consciously and proudly proclaimed themselves to be transmitters of that tradition considered Socinianism to be the foreground of the Enlightenment.

The rationality of Socinus was very limited. It was not autonomic as in every religious system which assumes the existence of divine revelation and accepts it as a basis for its faith. Nevertheless it was a step forward compared with the "rationality" of Thomas Aquinas or with orthodox Protestantism. It emancipated reason from the domination of the authorities of the church institution and tradition. Reason in the Socinian system became the only judge of the veracity of the "divine word." In the system of Thomas Aquinas every religious speculation had to be subjected to the

³⁷ Z. Ogonowski, "Tolerance and Religion," in *Z zagadnień tolerancji w Polsce XVII wieku*, Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1958, Part 2. Marian Hillar, "From the Polish Socinians to the American Constitution," in *A Journal from the Radical Reformation: A Testimony to Biblical Unitarianism*, Vol. 3:2 (Winter, 1994), 22-57.

decisive authority of the institution and tradition of the Church. Socinus rejected this doctrine as well as the attitude of heterodox spiritualistic and mystical systems which also rejected the authority of the Church. In that sense early Socinianism was a precursor of the later rational doctrines of the next generation of Socinians and of the Enlightenment.³⁸

³⁸ Marian Hillar, "The Philosophical Legacy of the XVIth and XVIIth Century Socinians: Their Rationality," in *The Philosophy of Humanism and the Issues of Today. Anthology of Essays (Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism, Vol. 4)*, Houston: American Humanist Association, 1995, 117-126. Marian Hillar, "The XVIIth and XVIIIth Century Socinians: Precursors of Freedom of Conscience, of Separation of Church and State, and of the Enlightenment," in *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism*, Houston: American Humanist Association, 2001, Vol. 9, 35-60.