

Socinianism



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Abstract

Socinianism is a term that could have at least two meanings. The first refers to the religious Unitarian movement broadened at the end of the sixteenth century by the early followers of the Italian thinker Fausto Sozzini (Faustus Socinus or Socini), which crossed and overlapped with the *Ecclesia minor* (Minor Church) of Poland – the Antitrinitarian branch of the reformed Church of the *Fratres Poloni* (Polish Brethren). The second sense stands for the Christian theological, philosophical, and moral doctrine inspired by the works of Fausto and his uncle Lelio (Laelius), which became widespread in Europe, especially in Holland and England, from the seventeenth century and later in America.

Heritage and Rupture with the Tradition

Socinianism is rooted in the intense movement of people and ideas that distinguished the rise and strengthening of the Reformation in Europe. Its main connections can be found in sixteenth-century Antitrinitarianism, which has been

considered one of the peculiar features of the Radical reformation (Biagioni 2016), in the demand for religious renewal praised by Spiritualists and Anabaptists (Roth et al. 2007), and in the humanist ideal of critical thinking. In addition to Miguel Servet, Lelio, and Fausto contested the Trinity by reading the Scripture through the philological method of Lorenzo Valla (Cantimori 1939). In their criticism, however, a very important role was also played by Aristotelianism, which Lelio encountered during his stay in Padua (Rotondò’s introduction to Sozzini 1986) and Fausto used eventually against the Platonism that, according to him, characterized Christian doctrine (Scribano 2007, Salatowsky 2015). Servet’s death in Geneva in 1553 at stake because of his denial of the Trinity obliged Antitrinitarians either to hide themselves, with a nicodemite attitude very familiar to Italian dissenters (Cantimori 1939; Rotondò 1967), or to find a safe place in which they were not prosecuted. As a consequence, many Italian thinkers fled to Poland, where the Confederation of Warsaw of 1573 had declared a politics of tolerance between Lutherans, Calvinists, and the Bohemian Brethren, who had been present in Poland since the 1550s. Formally excluded from the covenant, Antitrinitarians could also take advantage thereof (Wilbur 1947; Caccamo 1970; Balázs 2015). Hence, this climate of tolerance, which also distinguished the later reigns of the Catholic Stephen Báthory (1576–1586) and his successor Sigismund III Vasa (1587–1632), allowed the growth

of Socinianism consequent on Fausto Sozzini's influence on the Minor Church of Raków (Wilbur 1947; Kot 1957). Since his arrival in Poland in 1579, Sozzini became the reference point for the Polish Antitrinitarians, to whose reunification he contributed during the 1580s through an internal and measured discussion of several theological or practical issues, as, for instance, the commitment of Christians in politics (Szczucki 2004). However, starting from the 1630s, the increase in Poland of the Catholic Counter-Reformation due to Władysław IV and John II Casimir and the internal political divisions caused by the 30 Years War lead to the persecution of Socinians – in 1638 its center in Raków had even been destroyed –, who were definitively expelled from the country in 1658 (Tazbur 1974; Williams 1980).

Innovative and Original Aspects

The humanity of Christ and the unity of God are two among the several distinctive aspects of Socinianism. Both of these points descend from a critical analysis of the Scripture, in particular of John's Gospel. Through a historical and anti-metaphysical reading of its prologue, Lelio and then more extensively Fausto claimed that Christ was a man, who had been chosen and divinized by God in order to show the way to attain the eternal life, which is God's reward for good Christian conduct (*Brevis explicatio in primum Iohannis caput*, Sozzini 1986, 101–128; *Explicatio primae partis primi capitis Evangelistae Johannis*, Sozzini 2004, I, 73–85). For this reason and contrarily to some nonadorantist or Judaizing tendencies among Polish and Transylvanian Antitrinitarians (Szczucki 1982), Fausto Sozzini underlined that Christ must be worshipped, although he was wholly human and his death did not represent an atonement for human sins but only an example to follow (*De Jesu Christo Servatore*, Sozzini 2004, II, 119–246).

Sozzini's reading of John's Gospel derived from the thesis according to which Christians should analyze the Scripture through reason, by explaining the problematic points with a

comparative analysis of the Bible itself, as religious truths can be above reason, but never against it (*De Sacra Scripturae Auctoritate*, Sozzini 2004, I, 263–284; Cantimori 1939). Among these religious and rational truths, it is worth recalling, on the one hand, the refusal of the doctrine of original sin and the consequently great extent of human freedom (cf. Biagioni's introduction to Sozzini and Pucci 2010), and, on the other hand, the limits of the power and knowledge of God. Nonetheless, according to Fausto, even if human reason can grasp all the essential doctrines of the Christian religion, it cannot state by itself the religious truths, which only Scripture can reveal (Rohls 2005a). This form of rationalism, though very limited, as well as the distinction between *fundamentalia fidei* and *adiaphora* already present in Erasmus, whose thought was well known to Fausto (Bietenholz 2005), lead Socinianism, from the time of Lelio's discussion with John Calvin, to the antidogmatic view that in order to be saved only a few doctrines needed to be accepted, since what really matters is behaving in accordance with the ethical principles preached by Jesus Christ (Ogonowski 1974). Despite Fausto's thinking that true religion lies in the Bible and that non-believers cannot be saved, since Christian doctrine provides the only true path to salvation, Socinianism became over time one of the most important supporters of toleration, whose limits and extension would be clarified by the 1665 Amsterdam edition of the Catechism of Raków, first published in 1605, 1 year after Fausto's death (Pintacuda de Michelis 1975).

Impact and Legacy

After the 1656 diaspora, some Socinians fled to neighboring countries, such as Brandenburg, East Prussia, and Silesia, in which, however, they were not always well received (Tazbur 1974). Consequently, they mostly emigrated to the Netherlands, where their doctrines had been known since the end of sixteenth century (Kühler 1912). In 1598, for instance, the Socinians Christophorus Osterodt, a German theologian, and Andreas Voidovius, a Polish nobleman, travelled to

Amsterdam in order to obtain support from the Dutch political authorities (Simonutti 2005a; Rohls 2005b). Their mission failed, and the Anti-trinitarian books which they carried with them, among which was Fausto Sozzini's treatise *De Jesu Christo Servatore*, were seized, but Socinian thought started to be analyzed and discussed by noteworthy thinkers, such as Hugo Grotius (Blom 2005). Ironically, during the intense conflict between Gomarists and Arminians that took place at the beginning of seventeenth century, many exponents of Arminianism, who had criticized Sozzini's doctrine, as Hugo Grotius had done (Blom 2005; Rohls 2005a), were charged with Socinianism. This overlapping depended on the similarity that existed between Arminian and Socinian conceptions about predestination and human freedom (Visser 2004). Contrary to Gomarism or in general Calvinism, both confessions valued the role of human behavior for salvation, as well as of the use of reason in religious matters (Rohls 2005b). As Pierre Bayle among others observed (Bayle 1740, art. "Socin, Fauste"), religious rationalism, as well as the already mentioned doctrine of tolerance, could be seen as the most important legacy of Sozzini's thought, despite the limits imposed by him on reason. This is particularly evident in the writings of Sozzini's nephew, Andrzej Wiszowaty, whose *Religio rationalis*, published posthumously in 1685 (Wiszowaty 1982), has been considered for a long time as the prelude to eighteenth century Deism (Israel 2006). As has been shown, in seventeenth century European philosophy Socinianism played an essential role in the debate and was recognized by the most important philosophers of the time – for example, Hobbes (Paganini 2005), Spinoza (Mignini 2005), Locke (Simonutti 2005b; Marshall 2000) and Newton (Snobelen 2005) – as a theoretical and theological system with which one must come to terms. Even after having been defeated by mainstream thinkers, Socinianism did not vanish. Rather, it became an ideal paradigm of rationalism, tolerance, and freedom, especially in eighteenth-century North America (Wilbur 1952).

Cross-References

- Anabaptism
- Arminius, Jacob
- Calvin, Jean
- Grotius, Hugo
- Humanism
- Nicodemism
- Philology, Renaissance
- Sozzini, Lelio and Fausto

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