

“The Huguenots: Religious Integrity at All Costs”

By Rev. Kim D. Wilson

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos

December 6, 2015

Cousin Audrey was our family genealogist. And she researched our family tree back in the days before computers, when getting information was a lot more difficult. Audrey cheerfully and generously copied and mailed all of her findings to everyone in the family, whether or not we were interested.

She had traced our ancestors back to the French Huguenots, who were Protestants during the reformation. Is there anyone else here with Huguenot ancestors? My ancestors, the Bonnetts, were among the Huguenots who fled France because of religious persecution and settled in New Rochelle, in New York.

The story Audrey told us was that they were fleeing from France and had their two small children hidden in panniers on a donkey, and covered with vegetables. The mother told them to keep perfectly quiet, no matter what happened. A soldier stopped them and demanded to know what was in the panniers. The mother told him there were fresh vegetables for the market. The soldier stuck his sword into one of the panniers and then rode away. As soon as he was out of sight, the parents opened up the pannier. The child had been cut in the leg by the sword! And he had stayed perfectly quiet, just as he had been told.

A few years ago, I became a convert to the joys of genealogy. I joined Ancestry.com, which gives members access to millions of records. A genealogist's dream. I got out all that stuff Audrey sent me over the years, and put her info together with what Ancestry had available. I created a big family tree. One of the features of Ancestry is that it will offer you “hints.” It automatically finds records that might match an ancestor. For example it could be a census record, or a birth record, or it could be the information that another Ancestry member has already added to their tree.

And we don't know where they got their info, so it's good to take the other members' information with a grain of salt, because some people are more fastidious than others about the accuracy of the info.

I knew from Audrey that the ancestors who came from France and settled in New Rochelle were Daniel Bonnett and his wife Jeanne Couturier. She was born in a small town in France called Thorigné. He had been a weaver in the same town. Was HE born there, too? People didn't usually travel that far back then. But other ancestry members said he was born in the Piemonte area of Italy. That seemed strange to me. Especially when I looked at the map and saw how far away it was from Thorigné.

So, last June, as many of you know, Gene and I traveled around France for a month. Gene had also gotten interested in genealogy, and since we both have French ancestors, we thought it would be interesting to go to see some of the towns that our ancestors came from.

One of the ancestral places Gene wanted to visit was Castre, a small city about 50 miles inland from the Mediterranean. I should say here that we really like to use Air B n B, which is a service where people can offer other people places to stay. in Castre, we were the houseguests of a man named Robert.

Robert not only gave us a walking tour of the city, but it turns out that he is an avid genealogist. He got on the internet, and he was able to find a lot of details about some of Gene's ancestors.

When I asked Robert if he might be able to find information on some of my French ancestors, he said he would try. But he couldn't find anything. Gene's ancestors were all Catholics, and mine were all Protestants. The French records that predate the government records were all from the Catholic churches. There were no records from any of the Protestant churches.

I was still hopeful, though. When we got to La Rochelle, we went to the Huguenot museum there. La Rochelle was where one of the largest populations of Huguenots had lived. There were records of the passengers who sailed from La Rochelle to the United States. I assumed Daniel and Christine had left from La Rochelle and gone to New Rochelle. I gave the woman there the names of all my Huguenot ancestors, and she checked each one, but none of them were listed as having departed from there. Another strike out.

So, if they didn't leave from La Rochelle, then where?

Aside from not finding any information about the Bonnetts, the museum was very informative and helped me learn more about the Huguenots and what they endured. I learned about the Edict of Nantes, which was passed in 1598 by King Henry IV. The Edict gave the Huguenots certain religious and civil rights. And I learned about the revocation of the Edict in 1685 by his grandson, Louis XIV. The same year in which John Locke wrote his landmark letter in which he decries religious wars and the folly of not allowing diversity of religious views.

One of the placards at the museum showed several Huguenot churches, and it said that “of the temples built before the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, there is practically nothing left. Between the years 1660 – 1685, almost all were destroyed on order of King Louis XIV.” Before the Revocation.

Well, that changes things. I thought that the Huguenots were protected from persecution during the almost 90 years that the Edict was in place, but clearly this was not the case. The burning of all the churches also explains why there are no Huguenot birth, death, baptism or marriage records anywhere. Henry IV was assassinated in 1610 and his son Louis XIII (under the regency of Marie de Medici) started going after the Huguenots –basically ignoring the Edict.

Another placard described what happened after the Edict was revoked. I translated it as follows: “Deprived of all legal existence after 1685, Protestants converted en masse, often against their will. But most only recanted on the face of it and later organized the Church of the Desert.”

“Clandestine worship was prohibited and harshly repressed, but still they celebrated in between towns and villages with hundreds of the faithful.” (They gathered in the woods or fields or barns to worship.)

Hundreds of ministers were martyred, killed by hanging, something to do with a wheel or burned alive. It was a dangerous time.

“Very numerous also were those who braved the risks and punishments...and who preferred to leave France and exile themselves in countries of refuge: England, Holland, Germany, America or South Africa....It wasn't until 1789 that protestants were given their full civil rights and religious liberty.”

Two years ago, when I was in Germany, I was able to find new information about my German ancestors very easily. This time, ironically, it was after I got back home that I was able to fill in some of the gaps in my knowledge and understanding of the Huguenots and of Daniel Bonnett and his family.

I discovered that there was a precursor to the Huguenots called the Waldensians. It originated with the preaching of Waldo of Lyons –this was in the 12th and early 13th centuries – 200 years before Martin Luther’s time. The Waldensians were accused of heresy and were repressed and persecuted. One of the areas in which the Waldensians lived was Piemonte, Italy. Ahah! A connection! Suddenly, it starts to make sense that the Bonnetts were in northern Italy!

Three years before Daniel was born, the Duke of Savoy, who was a grandson of Henry IV (the one who signed the Edict of Nantes), and who had been persecuting the Waldensians, ordered his soldiers to massacre the heretics in Piemonte.

The attackers threw children against rocks and pulled them apart. Some people they burned alive, some they hacked into pieces, some they threw over cliffs. Some they slowly dismembered, some they flayed alive; others were disemboweled; some were mutilated, and, according to one account, “of others the flesh and brains were boiled and actually eaten by these cannibals.”

Some 1700 Waldensians died that spring day, known as the Piedmont Easter Massacre. Somehow, Daniels parents must have survived. We don’t know anything about Daniel’s childhood, but Daniel apparently left his hometown as a young adult and traveled across the country to Thorigné. We know he was a weaver there. He left Thorigné shortly after the Edict of Nantes was revoked in 1685 and fled, along with his future wife, to Germany, to a little town of Huguenots called Friedrichstal.

I found a record from the Friedrichstal church that in 1692, Daniel Bonnett married Jeanne Couturier. Then, I found records of their children, and they were all born in...Bristol, England! The oldest child, Daniel junior, was born at the beginning of 1695, so they must have traveled to England the previous year or so. Ah, so the story of them escaping France –they must have been heading from Germany to the ferry that would take them across the channel to England! If you look at a map you can see how they would have traveled through Luxembourg and Belgium, and how they had to cross into France to get to the ferry.

I hope Daniel and his family finally found a safe haven in England. But re-settling in America still sounded like a better option, so in 1701, Daniel, Jeanne and their two children set sail for New Rochelle. They went on to have three more children. One of those children was Jean Pierre, or John Peter, my 6th great-grandfather.

“One of the most moving chapters of the history of humankind was written by the Huguenots of France,” states an article in Ministry magazine. To say they were persecuted doesn’t begin to describe the reality of what they went through. Probably hundreds of thousands of Huguenots were killed during the 2nd half of the 16th century. One of the worst days was the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in Paris, in 1572. Three thousand were massacred in Paris, and even after orders to stop, over 6 weeks, Catholics massacred about 70,000 Huguenots throughout France. Their only crime was to pray, sing hymns and encourage each other in the word of God.

The story of the Huguenots is an important one, for several reasons. They were one of the first sects to separate themselves from the Catholic Church. And they stand out in history as being singularly steadfast in their faith, in spite of some of the most awful persecution imaginable. No matter what happened, the Huguenots continued to resist. In fact, during the worst times of oppression, they became more fervent and faithful than ever. They continued to proclaim their message of forgiveness and salvation.

I wonder how many of us would be as unwavering in similar circumstances. I think their courage and conviction can serve as an inspiration to us.

The Huguenot story is also important because the Edict of Nantes set a historic precedent for the tolerance and acceptance of dissenting religious viewpoints. And their story marks the dawning of a new paradigm in which church could exist as an entity separate from the state –concept which John Lockwood embraced. Understanding the Huguenot story may help us gain insight into some of the dynamics in parts of the Middle East --Syria, for example, where the relationship between religion and state resembles that of pre-reformation Europe.

Finally, the Huguenot immigrants in America and elsewhere laid some of the firmest foundations of religious freedom. Immigrants like Daniel and Jeanne Bonnett. Let us pause for a moment in gratitude for the sacrifices our religious ancestors made, sacrifices which make it possible for us to worship here today.

May we always be grateful to our religious forebears for the gift of freedom.
Amen.