

MICHAEL SERVETUS

The First Parish in Wayland, Mass.
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Michael Servetus, a sixteenth-century Spanish-born doctor, editor, mathematician, and sometime theologian, has been getting a lot of attention of late in certain circles. Maybe not around the water cooler where you work or on the sidelines at the soccer field. But this month is the 450th anniversary of his martyrdom at the stake in John Calvin's Geneva, and ceremonies are being held this month at various sites in Europe. I think I'm right that the house where he was born in 1511 is being dedicated as a museum to his memory. And here in the United State, last year featured a fine new biography of Servetus, *Out of the Flames* by Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone.

I think as histories go, the book is particularly entertaining, as there were so many interesting events going on around the first half of the sixteenth century. The Goldstones treat themselves to tangents galore, adorning Servetus' own remarkable life with accounts of Gutenberg and the advent of mass printing, Erasmus and Humanism, Luther and the Reformation, Loyola and the Counter-Reformation, Calvin and his Genevan theocracy, the classical geographer Ptolemy and the birth of modern mapping (that Servetus played a part in), the classical physician Galen and the birth of modern medicine (that Servetus almost played a big part in), blood circulation (which Servetus discovered) and William Harvey (who discovered it again 75 years later and was heard), Unitarianism as it unfolded in the centuries after Servetus famously proclaimed some of the viewpoints that would characterize our religion, and more, including the topic of their previous books, book collecting itself, and how particular books can be traced through the years, like the three existing copies of Servetus' mature masterpiece that Calvin and others tried to rid the world of. (Ironically, one of the three is Calvin's own personal copy.)

But most engaging is Servetus' own incredible story, along with the particularities of his personality. And for us, at least, I hope his theological ground-breaking, not to mention his integrity and tenacity, is worth remembering. For he was arguably the first Unitarian of modern times, and remains the best-known of Unitarian martyrs.

Not that he's an easy read for modern Unitarian Universalists. Last year a group of First Parish folk got together every month and read their way through an anthology of pieces important in Unitarian history. The anthology begins with a sample of the writings of Servetus, and truth be told, it's a little hard to get people enthused about calling him one of us.

But set in his own time, he made several important contributions to a history that leads to who we are today. First, he challenged the orthodoxy of Catholicism and Protestantism alike on central points of doctrine, often on the very issues that would become critical to the Unitarian movement, like the rejection of the Trinity and of predestination. Second, his martyrdom – what Voltaire later considered his murder by Calvin, though a trial was involved, “an assassination committed in ceremony,” said Voltaire – exposed the cruelty of religious suppression and persecution and caused a counter-movement toward tolerance. And third, he was the very model of a heretic, pursuing his ideas wherever reason, experience, conscience, and honesty led, notwithstanding authority, convention, and tradition.

In our religious tradition, unlike many others, “heretic” is not an insult but a badge of honor. Heretics are not villains but heroes in the stories we tell. And the heretic story we tell most often is this:

Servetus was born Miguel Serveto Conesa alias Reves in a Spanish family of some rank in the hamlet of Villanueva. The family was religious, which meant, as almost anywhere in Europe in 1511, devoutly Roman Catholic; a brother became a priest.

In an earlier biography of Servetus, *Hunted Heretic*, Roland Bainton noted that Europe was relatively calm before the Reformation. Humanism in the writings of Erasmus and others spread a popular message of ‘simple nondogmatic piety,’ preferring peace and harmony to contention over theological abstractions.

In Spain, where the Inquisition had been so fierce, and where resident Jews and Muslims had so recently been required to convert or to flee, Erasmus’ genial tolerance was welcomed. But it did not overcome national touchiness about the doctrine of the Trinity, because other Europeans were given to taunting Spaniards since among them there were former Muslims, whose conversions were considered suspect.

Such people were called Marranos, a term of disrespect, and the suspicion was that they still harbored an Islamic view of God, more strictly monotheistic than the Christian Trinity. Other Europeans would label Spaniards in general with the derogatory term, leaving them particularly insistent on their adherence to this particular doctrine of Christian theology, as well as to its counterpart, the divinity of Jesus.

It was one point on which Erasmus’ mild liberalism was not acceptable. And Erasmus did not even attack the doctrine of the Trinity. He merely pointed out that when the Bible says God, it almost always means God the Father; and in his progressive translation of the New Testament, he deleted a passage that referred to the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit as three *and* one.

It was the only biblical text to support the orthodox view of the Trinity. But it was also spurious, as Erasmus knew from his study of Greek manuscripts and early church writers, so he took it out. Without that line, even though the New Testament speaks of a Father, a Son, and a Holy Ghost, it never uses any of the language upon which Catholic church dogma had long insisted: a God of one person in three substances, a Trinity.

People fought and died in the fourth century (yes, they died) over whether God’s three persons were of like substance or the same substance (the latter view prevailed), and then fought just as fiercely over whether the Son was the first-born of all creation of the Father or was, like the Father, pre-existent (again, the latter view won out).

So important did people consider such matters, especially (as I said) in Spain, it was with amazement that Servetus as a teenager realized that they are not to be found in the Bible. It had been bothering young Miguel that Jews and Muslims were so resistant to accepting the truth of Christianity. He knew that the doctrine of the Trinity was a major impediment, since it offended their monotheistic assumptions.

And here it turned out on investigation that they might be right! How could Christians demand adherence to a doctrine not even found in the Bible? As Servetus would say in his first book, “Not one word is found in the Bible about the Trinity nor about its persons, nor about the essence nor the unity of substance nor of one nature of the several beings nor about any of the rest of their rantings and logic chopping.”

As you may guess, we have here a bright, inquisitive youth on his way to becoming an opinionated, contentious young man. At fourteen he had “become attached to the service” of a Franciscan doctor and legislator, a man of liberal spirit and peaceful temperament. After two years Servetus went to study law in France.

He was later recalled to the service of the doctor, who had become Confessor to the King of the Holy Roman Empire, which then included most of Europe, including Spain. Together they traveled to Italy for the King’s coronation by the Pope, and then to Germany, where Servetus left the doctor’s service. Soon Servetus was on Protestant soil, in Basel, where Erasmus himself had been, that exemplar of tolerance, but where, in typical Reformation fashion, a reformer of sterner stuff had taken command and the spirit moved quickly to the destruction of church imagery and the banning of Catholic masses. Erasmus left, and the leadership, having triumphed over the Catholic establishment on its right, moved on to crush the Anabaptists on its left as well.

The reformer provided haven for Servetus to stay for ten months, working on his own theology. In that time, he discovered the newly republished works of Tertullian and Iraneus, early

Christian leaders from the days before the church, under the prodding of the state, standardized its theology in 325.

“Servetus, ruminating on these passages,” wrote Bainton, “tried to find a way to some clarity. One thing was perfectly clear: Jesus was a man. The Scriptures over and over refer to him as a man. He is also called the Son of God and even God. But if he were God, he could be God only in the sense in which [everyone] is capable of being God.”

Speaking in remarkably modern terms, Servetus went on to write that God “is our spirit dwelling in us, and this is the Holy Spirit within us. In this we testify that there is in our spirit a certain working latest energy.... So is everyone that is[,] born of the spirit of God.”

Servetus was willing to accept the doctrine of his time that God’s revelation or God’s Word is eternal. But he rejected the usual assumption that the Son is therefore eternal, existing before it took form in the human Jesus. To our ears, this may all seem impossibly remote, petty quibbles among those who basically agreed, all of them committed Christians who believed in salvation through Christ.

But back then, the differences mattered greatly. A month after Servetus arrived in Basel in 1530, Konrad in der Gassen was executed there for denying Jesus’ divinity and the efficacy of prayer. Servetus eventually moved to Strassburg, the most tolerant of places just then. Sebastian Franck was there then, too, another hero of our heritage, who was already defining the heretics of church history as its heroes.

By then, Servetus had developed his own heresies into a book, *On the Errors of the Trinity*. They were published by a local printer, who, although of independent spirit, hid his part. There was some good initial response, especially in Strassburg, and the first printing of a thousand copies sold out. But much of the larger reaction was shock, and before long even in Strassburg the book was banned, and then in Basel and all of Switzerland.

The next year he attempted to make his case more moderately, but added a rejection of infant baptism, only stirring more reaction. By then he had provoked the enmity of most Catholics and Protestants alike. Back home in Spain the authorities plotted to trick him home so he might be arrested. Having declared his belief in the humanity of Jesus and the oneness of God, he was condemned throughout Europe, everywhere sought, and the sale of his book was prohibited.

He was not yet twenty-one.

What he did was to return to France and, under an assumed name, study math at the University of Paris. It helped that since boyhood he had been a master of languages, and as an adult spoke five fluently. He then served as an editor of books, including his work on maps, the first field of interest where empirical knowledge successfully challenged the church’s claims to truth. It turns out ship captains preferred maps that told them where the shoals were, based on observation, to maps that told them what the Bible said the world should be like.

Servetus returned to the University of Paris to study medicine, and was again part of a movement to move from a church-enforced model, based on ancient theories of imbalanced humors, to empirical reality. He was perhaps the first person to understand – and probably the first person to describe in print -- the human circulatory system. In his time, they thought all blood was created in the liver and pumped out to the body. Servetus believed that blood in fact circulated, and furthermore that blood passed from one side of the heart to the other through the lungs, and that between veins and arteries there were blood vessels, which would not be proven for ages.

He went on to a successful twelve-year career as a country doctor. But he continued to edit on the side, including an edition of the Bible that rekindled his theological interest. He worked on his theology, coming to a God that permeates all. People are born innocent and free, and through their own efforts can achieve union with God, though the outer person will ever fall short. Baptism of infants made no sense, since they did not yet have any sin, nor were they ready to chose baptism, until they were twenty.

It is hard to imagine any theologian farther afield from Servetus at that point than fellow reformer John Calvin, who utterly disbelieved in free will, accepted infant baptism, and was a trinitarian whose god was a being apart (whereas Servetus' had become utterly immanent, dwelling in all things).

Still, they had known each other, decades before, and Calvin's Geneva was the new center of Protestantism. A correspondence began between them. Calvin seems to have tried to be responsive and polite; Servetus was condescending, insulting, and indefatigable, cranking out thirty letters, continuing even after Calvin had retreated from the relationship.

Servetus had prepared a fresh edition of his ideas, to which he added his thirty letters to Calvin, and had it all published secretly at his own expense. Copies started to circulate. Some were delivered to Geneva. And Calvin set about, through one of his staff who had a cousin who lived near Servetus, to expose the country doctor as a notorious heretic.

In time, Servetus was jailed, but he escaped and headed for Italy. In his absence, he was tried, found guilty of heresy and sedition, his picture burned in effigy, and his books burned for real, as many as could be found.

In one of history's great mysteries, Servetus chose the route to Naples that took him through Geneva, where he was recognized, arrested, and put on trial.

Calvin ruled Geneva. He had been allowed to write their laws to his own stern liking. Calvin had views on heresy and its punishment as severe as the Inquisition. And from Calvin's viewpoint, Servetus' views were heresy pure.

Servetus believed people are born pure, Calvin that we are born depraved. Servetus believed in free will, Calvin in predestination. Servetus believed in a universal God who lives in us and in all things, with whom we may grow into inner union. Calvin himself quoted Servetus as saying that "all things are part and portion of God..." Calvin was incredulous; his own God was a transcendent being whose major attributes were power and will.

So Servetus was brought to trial. He was not compliant. In fact, it is said that he was "insolent and overbearing." (Bainton 175) He did propound a view of early church history that allowed for tolerance. The prosecutor defended the execution of heretics, arguing that a plea for tolerance was just an admission of guilt.

In the end, with the backing of local Swiss magistrates, Servetus was condemned for heresy for his views on the Trinity and on infant baptism. He was sentenced to be burned slowly at the stake, along with his books.

You may recall that one of the arguments thought important then was whether Christ existed before the union of the Word with the human person Jesus, which Servetus denied and upon which Christian orthodoxy insisted. On the way to his execution, a church leader tried to get him to renounce his errors and admit that Christ is the eternal son of God. Feisty to the end, as the fires burned his cry was both poignant and unrepentant: "O Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have mercy on me!"

We remember him for that kind of integrity, as annoying as such purists can be. Headstrong and exasperating as Servetus could be, his tenacity and conviction resulted in the promulgation of ideas that echoed on and on, and do even yet, while harsher notions of predestination, human depravity, and uniformity of belief have somewhat declined in much of Western religious thought. And his bravery and brutal death provoked a widespread condemnation of religious persecution and a movement toward toleration for conscience.

It is for people like Michael Servetus, then and now, that we harbor a fondness for heretics and the unsettling, enlivening challenges they raise.