

Remembering Michael Servetus

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Today marks a particular anniversary because it was exactly 450 years ago, this very day, that a panel of judges in Geneva passed judgment on Michael Servetus, the judgment that Beverly read. The condemned man was not present at that particular moment. The sentence was delivered and read to him the next morning. Execution was to follow almost immediately.

John Calvin, who had both instigated the trial and then orchestrated its development, had insisted on the death penalty even before charges were first filed. Yet, on the morning of the execution, he visited that doomed man, and he professed that he bore him no personal animosity. Servetus was in shackles in his cell. He was befouled by his own filth. He was covered with lice. And he begged to be beheaded, rather than burned. And Calvin, in a moment of relative leniency approved the idea, but he was overruled by the city magistrates. So, at the designated hour, Servetus was led to his place of execution. Still wearing his shackles, he was bound with an iron chain with a stake. A sulfur crown was placed upon his forehead, and his books were heaped upon the pyre. The pyre was composed deliberately of green wood. The idea of green wood was to make the fire last longer, the torment longer and to roast him slowly alive.

The signal was given. The wood was lit. For thirty minutes, Servetus was seared by flames, and as the flames rose about him, he alternatively begged for mercy in the name of Jesus, and he screamed in his dying agony. According to one account of the day, some of the good citizens of Geneva who watched this horrid spectacle, threw additional wood upon the fire. One wonders: did they act out of compassion? Did they hope to end his torment all the more quickly? Or did they approve of the sentence and they hoped to display that approval accordingly? Or did they hope to alleviate suspicions that they themselves might be in sympathy with this heretic?

We don't know. But in any event, after half an hour's time, Servetus the heretic was very much dead, his books and body reduced to ashes. Calvin and his magistrates were satisfied. This was their version of shock and awe, by which they hoped to terrify any other heretics in their midst.

And who was this man, this troublesome Spaniard? What did he do? What did he say that was so awful that merited such a death? A brief biography:

Michael Servetus was born in the town of Villa Nueva, in the north of Spain, in 1511. He was raised a Catholic in the age of the Inquisition. He studied law, astronomy, medicine and theology. He is credited with the discovery of the circulation of the blood. He translated the Bible twice.

While translating that Bible, he was disturbed to discover that certain words and doctrines were not to be found in those pages. Foremost among those missing

doctrines was any mention of the Trinity. Soon thereafter, he witnessed the coronation of Charles V, who was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Clement VII. Servetus was shocked by the extravagances he witnessed, much like Martin Luther had been some years before. This experience, coupled with the reading of the Christian scriptures, converted him to Protestantism. He revisited scriptures and the early church authorities and he concluded that Christianity had embraced certain particular philosophies that were foreign to Jesus. They were the products of a different, later age.

At the tender age of twenty, Servetus set his thoughts on paper. He wrote a book called *On the Errors of the Trinity*. (Tape ends. Some text is lost.)

Servetus attempted to establish a correspondence with Calvin, in the hope that he might convert the older man to his heretical views. When Calvin broke off the correspondence, Servetus responded with anger and ridicule. Meanwhile, he continued to write. He published a work entitled *The Restitution of Christianity*. In it he championed the view that God was love, that all souls were eligible for heaven. This was despicable stuff in that age.

He sent the work to Calvin who responded by sending him a copy of his own master work, *The Christian Institutes*. Servetus recognized that Calvin had nothing more to say to him, so he sent back that book to Calvin, with all kinds of obnoxious remarks scrawled in the margins. This wounded Calvin's pride. So he began a campaign of publicly insulting him. In fact, they both engaged in insulting one another. Servetus wrote the Calvin's gospel was "without God, without true faith, without good works." As was mentioned in the pronouncement of death, he wrote also that "instead of a god, you have a three-headed Cerebus; for death you have a deterministic dream." Calvin was not amused and he publicly stated that if Servetus ever dared to come to Geneva, he would surely not leave there alive.

I would like to point out that if Michael Servetus showed some sparks of genius, he also showed occasional touches of madness. He believed, for example, that the archangel Michael spoke to him directly, and that the apocalypse was imminent. This man, this Spaniard, was full of prophetic courage, fire and ire.

Some will say that his antagonistic nature led to his own downfall. *The Restitution of Christianity* had been signed with the initials 'M.S.V.', a weak disguise for 'Michael Servetus of Villa Nueva'. The work included thirty copies of his correspondence with Calvin. One of Calvin's chief lieutenant's alerted a Catholic relative that Servetus was the author and living in Catholic lands. In an unprecedented act of cooperation between fundamentalist Protestants and the Inquisition, they supplied one another with documents to convict this man. Facing arrest in both Catholic and Protestant lands, he decided, incredibly enough, to go to Geneva.

He went to Geneva and Servetus stayed there for perhaps a month. He even attended a church service that Calvin led. He was recognized and almost immediately arrested. This time he did not escape. On trial for his life, he was denied any legal

counsel. He was poorly treated in prison and after several months, his spirit was broken, but he remained defiant and insolent until his end.

As I mentioned earlier, he suffered in the fire for thirty minutes. It must have been an eternity for him. Michael Servetus at the time was forty two years old, one year younger than myself. When it was over, Catholics and Protestants alike both rejoiced. Actually, as was mentioned in the indictment, the Inquisition, furious that Servetus had escaped their clutches, burnt him in effigy.

Let me add two footnotes to this trial: as a transient in Geneva, the city magistrates did not, according to their constitution, have any authority to punish Servetus, merely to expel him. Two of the reasons why Calvin showed no mercy to this man, though, were that there were dissidents in the city challenging Calvin's political power and he thought that a show of force might stifle the opposition. Secondly, he expressed the view that it was a manner of honor for Protestants, that they should match the ferocity of the Inquisition.

Now we are separated from this event by four and a half centuries. It is, one might say, a time when we peer into a distant mirror. It's always a challenge to put oneself in another's mindset or place in time. We may ask, "What sort of place was this Geneva, where this incident happened?" To give you a flavor of the time, let me read to you from Durant's *History of Civilization*:

"The council joined in the prohibition of gambling, card playing, profanity, drunkenness, the frequenting of taverns, dancing, indecent or irreligious songs, excess in entertainment, extravagance in living, and in modesty in dress. The allowable color and quantity of clothing and the number of dishes permissible at a meal were specified by law. Jewelry and lace were frowned upon. A woman was jailed for arranging her hair to an immoral height. Theatrical performances were limited to religious plays, and then these too were forbidden. Children were to be named not after saints in the Catholic calendar, but preferably after Old Testament characters. One obstinate father served four days in prison for insisting on naming his son 'Claude' instead of 'Abraham'. Censorship of the press was taken over from Catholic and secular precedence, and enlarged. To speak disrespectfully of Calvin or the clergy was a crime. The first violation of these ordinances was punishable with a reprimand, further violation with fines, persistent violation with imprisonment or banishment. Fornication was to be punished with exile or drowning. Adultery, blasphemy or idolatry, with death. In one extraordinary incident, a child was beheaded for striking its parents."

The zeal shown by the Calvinists of that era produced two unexpected events. Their trial of Servetus became a model for both Catholics and Protestants alike who wanted to root out heresy. The execution of Servetus justified the further execution of Protestants by Catholics and of Catholics by Protestants. Intolerance and persecution raged across the continent of Europe for another century and a half, and spilled into this hemisphere as well. A second, perhaps more important result, is that a few individuals were genuinely shocked by Servetus' execution. The most important person in that regard was Sebastian Castello.

Castello had at one point been a close confidant of Calvin, but he fell out of favor and was banished from Geneva. When Servetus was executed, Castello wrote the first modern treaties on toleration entitled, *Should Heretics Be Persecuted?* This book consisted of quotes from various sources in favor of toleration. It asked key questions. First, what was a heretic? He noted that the Bible offered no definition. It only spoke of blasphemers. Castello concluded that, "After diligent investigation of what a heretic may be, I come to no another conclusion that what we are wont to charge with heresy are all those who are not of our own opinion." He also noted that many cities had established confessions, and one, while you might be orthodox in your own city, would be a heretic in any one of the others. Also Castello asked, "Can you really imagine Jesus, the founder of this faith, condemning any man, woman, or child to be burned at the stake?"

He suggested that it was absurd to employ earthly weapons in what all conceded was a spiritual struggle, that God alone knew the truth, and that therefore magistrates ought not to engage in religious persecution. More to the point, he argued, "To kill a man does not mean to defend a doctrine, but to kill a man." When the Genevans, burned Servetus, they did not defend a doctrine, but they killed a man.

At the time that work was published, a year after the execution, those ideas, like Servetus, were dismissed. Nearly everyone sincerely believed that all citizens had to believe the same thing, otherwise the public order would be disturbed. It is worth remembering that the execution of Servetus, as horrible as it was, was by no means unique to his day. For centuries before and for centuries afterwards, men and women, branded as blasphemers and heretics, had suffered similar fates. Voltaire, writing much after the fact, called Servetus' death, "the first religious murder." Voltaire was certainly wrong in that regard; it was not the first. In Geneva alone, during a twenty two year span, fifty eight women and men had been executed similarly. If you tally the total number of similar executions in Protestant lands, the number reaches the thousands. Not to be outdone, you might consider the case of the Inquisition. One priest who had worked for the Inquisition estimated that between the years 1480 and 1808, 31,912 persons had been burned alive, and another 291,000 persons had been tortured, maimed, or imprisoned for their beliefs.

And yet it was the singular death of Michael Servetus which made more of an impression on some of his contemporaries than so many others. Perhaps it was because of the wider circulation of ideas which was then made possible by the printing press. Or perhaps it was due to the rising humanist ideals within the universities. Intellectuals began to realize that human beings had basic human rights, including the right to their own ideas, without threat to their life, liberty or pursuit of happiness. The fact that we are meeting in a Unitarian Universalist house of worship today owes much to Servetus, but more so to Castello. Both of those men happened to be early unitarians, 'unitarian' with a small 'u'. Neither one would be confused with a UU, but the were anti-trinitarian, and therefore, unitarian. And their lives, words and deeds did eventually help provoke a shift towards religious toleration. At the beginning of today's service, we lit a flaming chalice. When this symbol was first being discussed as a symbol for Unitarian

Universalism, it was suggested by some that the flame should be regarded as a tribute to Servetus' martyrdom. Others, of course, proposed that it should serve as a symbol of wisdom, of truth, and since, it is a symbol, it was eventually decided that its meaning could be multilayered. So, in an sense, this chalice does burn in part to honor Servetus, executed 450 years ago as of tomorrow.

When we moderns speak of toleration, we may mean different things. Toleration is not the same as a blanket acceptance of all things. Sometimes, newer prospective Unitarians will ask, "Can I believe anything I want?" The answer, if honest, will qualify that there are some actual natural limits to what one can believe and still regard oneself as a UU. No, you can't sacrifice animals. No, you can't champion racial hatred or warfare. You see even for liberals, there are some things that go beyond the pale.

Toleration is not the mere celebration of diversity. One can celebrate that which one regards as kindred. One cannot celebrate that which one finds offensive. Several years back, on the eve of the invasion of Afghanistan, there was much talk about the Taliban's oppression of women. That, you might argue, is an example of diversity, religious diversity. But it's hardly something to be celebrated, let alone condoned.

What then, is toleration? It means to permit something to be practiced without interference. But the true test of tolerance is when someone does something that you yourself do not like. As such, it is an expression of values, a judgment call. Why is toleration important? That particular question was asked of me when I first met with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. As I recall I answered that, "Toleration is important because we all depend upon it. It embodies the liberal spirit. Tolerance creates a hospitable climate for those who would doubt their faith, their way to faith. It allows for the free exchange of ideas and the time for an individual to weigh competing claims of truth."

Not all people in this day and age, let alone, in ages before us, have favored toleration. There have been many sincere people in the world who have despised toleration and have regarded it as evil. People who are tied to a rigid tradition make no pretense of toleration. You need not look far afield for examples. Once I worked with a fellow student chaplain who was very hostile to the notion of toleration. Her faith was evangelical Christian. She embraced a closed system of doctrine that allowed for only one path to salvation. She was not far removed in spirit or lineage from Calvin's Genevans. She was called to preach the gospel, she said, and she wholeheartedly answered the call. I remember how once she attempted to convert a Jewish patient on his deathbed. I remember as we talked about this afterwards, that I was appalled and I accused her of spiritual rape in that instance. She insisted she was only following her mandate from God. I do not doubt that she was sincere and that she acted out of what she considered the best of intentions, in her mind, at any rate.

We should not tolerate some things. There is much that we should not tolerate. While women in the western countries have made impressive gains in the past century, they still lag behind men in terms of financial earnings, and in this culture, that means

power. Should we tolerate people who champion racial hatred, or hate people based on their sexual orientation? I don't think so. This is not to suggest that we react with the same methods that they might choose. We are obliged to seek the transformation by lawful means, by persuasion. Perhaps we will hope to change them. But if we cannot change them, we should certainly try to limit their influence and to call them into account for their actions.

I do not doubt that people like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell were sincere when they made statements following September 11, to the affect that that calamity was the result of God's anger at America's tolerance of gays and lesbians. That doesn't make their opinions correct of course. Such voices are lurid examples of intolerance. They remind us why church and state must stay separate, and why courts must be stripped of any religiously fundamentalist basis. But even more so, when I hear fundamentalists preach such a hateful gospel, I wonder: how far removed are we from the age of Servetus and Calvin? I wonder.

And I put the question to you: what would it be like for us to live in a state where the dominant political figure was not elected to office but appointed by a governing council? Where the citizens tolerated the shocking and awful crimes committed by that leader and his deputies, who justified them by declaring that they were engaged in a holy war against Satan? A time when the government organized a network of spies to keep the population in check, when citizens and foreigners were thrown into prison and denied legal representation. When those same leaders would expose an individual's identity to punish him to his enemies and to serve notice to other perceived enemies?

Would we, if we lived in such a state, quietly submit? Would we, like the good citizens of Geneva, add wood to the fire? Or would we raise a cry like Castello, that something was horribly wrong, something most unholy?

Toleration has made great strides in the last several centuries, make no mistake, but the battle is far from over. There are more than a few people who advocate racial separation and discrimination. The oppression of people on the basis of their sexual orientation – and there are those that sincerely regard Unitarian Universalism as an evil, corrupting influence upon our civilization. I've heard it said: we have entered a new millennium. I've also heard it said the UUs might be in a unique position to foster greater toleration among the peoples of different faiths.

There are, I suspect, some things that we can't assist. Considering the past few centuries, though, I note that toleration is typically achieved only after a period of intense suffering. Perhaps the present affords us an opportunity. If it is true that the world has become a global village and that we must embrace pluralism or perish, then tolerance is a value that we must promote. The future of liberalism, if not the fate of the human species, might well hang in the balance. To the extent that we accept this challenge, we further the blessings of creation.

