

**Unitarian Universalist Heroes**  
**“Michael Servetus: Daring to Question! – Revisited”**  
A First Person Sermon by the Rev. Lloyd H. Dunham  
Honoring the Father of Religious Tolerance

Some have called me “The First Unitarian”.  
That isn’t exactly true  
but when I dared raise questions about the doctrine of the Trinity  
little did I know that it would cost me my life.

My name is Michael Servetus.

I was born in 1511

of noble blood

In Villanueva in Spain

We were a devout Roman Catholic family.

My brother Juan was a Roman priest.

The Protestant Reformation had been underway for at least a century.

Nearly a hundred years before I was born

John Huss had been burned at the stake

for questioning the teachings of the Church.

If I accomplished nothing else in my brief forty-two years,  
at least my death

shocked enough people

that religious tolerance

and a free exchange of ideas

became important to many.

In the years just before I was born,

Spain was a great bridge among Christians, Muslims and Jews.

But when the Inquisition came along

our country sided with Christian Europe.

Suddenly non-Christians had to decide between baptism as Christians  
or exile.

When I was just a kid of fourteen

I was sent to work for Juan de Quintana,

a Franciscan,

from whom I learned a lot.

After a while he released me

to study law at Toulouse.

In law school I learned that denial of the doctrine of the Trinity  
could result in execution.

I remembered the great and familiar words of the Shema,

”Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4

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Those are probably the most familiar  
and most repeated words  
in all of Judaism.  
In those words and in all of scripture  
I found no mention or justification for the Trinity  
and I could not understand why anyone could believe it.  
The Jews were calling it "tritheism".  
Muslims and Jews were laughing  
at the idea of the Trinity.  
Even lowly animals would be laughing  
if they comprehended that question!!

My law studies got interrupted.  
Quintana called me back  
to go with him to Rome  
as he accompanied the Emperor Charles of France  
who was trying to "mend fences" with the pope.  
I was only eighteen at the time  
and I was impressed –  
or should I say,  
sickened.  
There was the emperor  
actually kissing the feet of the pope!  
I couldn't help compare  
the opulence of the pope  
to the poverty of Jesus.  
It made no sense.  
How humble Jesus was  
but the pope was traveling in style  
carried on the shoulders of his servants!

It wasn't long after that,  
that I "slipped away" from Quintana  
as I was working hard at my own beliefs..  
I was still a young man of nearly twenty  
when I published my first book.  
I called it  
*On the Errors of the Trinity.*  
I had a difficult time getting my book published.  
I was refused in Basel.  
Then I traveled to Germany  
where I finally succeeded in Strassburg  
on the condition that the printer and location be omitted.  
You probably can't even imagine the reaction to this book.  
I was in mortal danger in Catholic areas.  
There were some things that I wrote  
that also angered Protestant reformers.  
I had no place that was safe.  
In my writing this book

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I was trying to call the church back to it's original faith,  
nothing more.

When my book got to Zurich

it angered the church authorities.

They thought it would "undermine all of Christendom"  
if left unchecked.

They were giving me power I didn't know I had!

I was just trying to stimulate discussion,

a free exchange of ideas,

like Martin Luther before me.

Melanchthon called me "plainly demented".

I believed in the Trinity

– but not as three distinct beings

but rather as three expressions of the one Divine Spirit.

In 1532, when I was still only twenty-one,

the Inquisition in Spain gave orders

for me to be lured or forced back to Spain

so they could deal with me.

However as long as I remained in Germany

they couldn't touch me!

They even tried to get to me through my priest brother Juan.

Both Catholic and Protestants were after me.

I wondered about seeking a safe harbor

by sailing to the "New Isles",

to your land,

so as to escape all this trouble.

I decided it was wise for me to protect myself

by disguising my name.

I started calling myself Michael of Villeneuve.

It was a thin disguise

since Villeneuve was my hometown in Spain,

but it helped when I was in Paris

and other parts of France.

Ever since I first became aware of the hostility aroused by such issues

I pleaded for religious liberty.

I had studied both the Bible and the Koran

and found even the Muslims had much to offer.

I pleaded for open free discussion

with tolerance for differences.

The ruler of France could usually be counted on for protection,

though you have to remember

that could change with the political weather!

This was well before

the great French experiment in religious pluralism

honoring both Catholic and Huguenot

The situation in France soon became hostile  
when the next king teamed up with the cardinal and the inquisitor  
in a campaign to root out all heresy.  
I had to contend with all three  
in spite of my pseudonym.

I tried to live inconspicuously  
in Lyon, France  
where I worked as an editor.  
I edited an edition of Ptolemy's Geography  
and Sante Pagnini's Bible.  
I wanted the Bible to be right  
so I worked diligently for four years to complete the work.  
I also earned part of my living  
by lecturing on geography.

While I was on this job  
my friend Champier encouraged me to study medicine.  
By my thirtieth birthday  
I was a doctor of medicine.  
I was fortunate  
because if I had been discovered for my theological views  
I would have been banished or burned  
in most every country of Europe.

This period of my life was relatively calm  
until I got interested in astrology.

After all,  
astrology was accorded credibility  
both in medicine and in religion  
in those days.

I stated my views in a statement I called  
*Apology for Astrology*.  
The faculty of medicine at the University of Paris took offense  
and judged me to be a charlatan.

I wasn't always creating controversy!  
I was working hard at my medical work.  
I had questions that grew out of my studies of anatomy  
which led me to discover the pulmonary circulation of the blood.  
It was a break through in medicine  
when I was able to show  
that the blood flowed through the lungs  
to deposit waste  
and pick up oxygen.  
It is the only thing about my life  
that gets me any respect –  
and most of the world has long forgotten even this.

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I announced my discovery in a work on theology,  
It seemed right since I saw no real distinction  
among the fields of theology, philosophy,  
psychology and physiology

I came to believe that there was an area of divinity in all humans.

This idea came to me out of my study of anatomy.  
Some of you have called this  
“the spark, the seed, or the light”.  
I called it soul.

And for me there was no sharp distinction between soul and spirit.

Once I was asked about my personal life.

To tell the truth, I almost got married.

The more I thought about it

I decided it would be unfair to my partner

since I had serious doubts about my ability to father a child,  
due to earlier injury.

Thus celibacy became for me a matter of choice and of preference.

From 1540 on for twelve years,

I lived a fairly quiet life in a suburb of Lyon,  
combining my work as a physician  
with my interest in editing.

Even then I couldn't keep my views to myself.

I was hearing a lot from the Anabaptists

and I liked much of what they believed.

I especially agreed with them on the subject of baptism.

Nowhere in the New Testament  
is there justification for infant baptism.

Anabaptists were accused of re-baptism  
when they baptized adults  
who had been baptized as infants.

Again these were things that brought them alienation  
from Roman Catholics and Protestant reformers alike.

You probably know that

there was very little separation of church and state  
in the sixteenth century.

In Switzerland the Catholics had controlled a number of cities,  
especially Geneva.

But time came when the people threw out their Catholic rulers  
and Geneva became a Protestant stronghold.

When this happened

I had hoped that the brilliant reformer John Calvin  
might be willing to listen to what I had to say  
and examine new perspectives  
on some of the issues of doctrine.

Catholics and German reformers alike wouldn't listen to me.

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So I entered into correspondence with Calvin  
in hope of an open and honest exchange of thinking  
about theological issues..  
However I soon discovered that our differences  
went much deeper than I had thought.

Calvin soon wrote a letter to his friend Farel  
in which he said,  
“Servetus has just sent me,  
together with his letters,  
a long volume of his ravings.

If I consent  
he will come here,  
but I will not give my word,  
for should he come,  
if my authority is of any avail  
I will not suffer him to get out alive.”

What a disappointment!  
I had been rejected in Rome, in Saragossa,  
Toulouse, Basel,  
Strassburg, Wittenberg –  
and now Geneva!

Calvin never returned to me the manuscript which I sent to him.  
Since it was my only completed copy  
I was forced to take my notes  
and other materials  
to reconstruct the book I was working on.  
I called it *The Restoration of Christianity*.

When it was done  
I again had trouble finding a publisher that would take it.  
I finally found a printer in Lyon  
who had no love for John Calvin  
and who was quite ready to print  
something that would offend Calvin.  
We published a thousand copies.

A copy of this new manuscript got into the hands of Calvin’s friend,  
Guillaume Trie.  
In English you would call him William – or Bill.

Trie had a Catholic cousin in the city of Lyon  
to whom he wrote about me.  
He claimed the city of Lyon was harboring a terrible heretic  
who deserved to be burned.  
I have his lengthy letter of condemnation  
if you wish to read it.  
I was summoned before the inquisitor  
but he found nothing against me.  
Trie was embarrassed  
and pleaded with Calvin to send him more evidence.

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Calvin did so in a most unusual act for a reformer  
who took strong exception to Roman doctrine.  
He assisted a Catholic in the case against me!  
Somehow Calvin managed to deny his part in this.

Finally the inquisitor had the proof he needed  
and I was arrested along with my publisher  
and we were sent to prison.

A trial followed.

I had to be very careful about what I said in court.

During the days of the trial

I got quite familiar with the prison layout.

The jailor often allowed prisoners out into the yard  
to relieve themselves at night –  
and this provided me with my opportunity.

About four in the morning

I got dressed

and then put my night clothes on over everything else  
and asked to go out.

Once out I knew exactly what to do to escape!

As soon as they knew I was gone  
they mounted a massive search ----  
but found nothing!

In my absence the tribunal passed sentence.

I was sentenced to a fine

and was to be paraded through town practically naked for humiliation,  
and then was to be burned alive -- slowly.

However I was not there to be executed –  
so they burned me in effigy!

Of course I had to go into hiding.

I decided to go to Naples to practice medicine,  
hopefully safe from the threats.

I happened to be passing through Geneva on a Sunday.

I knew I would be more conspicuous  
if I didn't go to church –  
so I went.

I was recognized –  
and arrested.

Some thought I was there to work with the Libertines  
in an overthrow of Calvin's government!

They say I was insolent and overbearing in my trial.

Maybe I was my own worse enemy  
but really it is hard to think clearly  
when your life is on the line.

The trial dragged on for weeks  
until finally on October 27, 1553

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they found me guilty  
and sentenced me to be burned at the stake.

They wasted no time.

That very afternoon they took me out to Champel  
and chained me to a stake.

They bound my book to my arm  
and placed a crown of straw on my head.  
It was sprinkled with sulfur.

A pile of green wood was about my feet.

The executioner flashed his torch by my face  
before starting the fire that took my life.  
A half hour later my agony had ended.

It may seem shocking to you,

but in my day they believed that heresy  
was more dangerous than murder.

A murderer only takes a physical life.

A heretic can destroy a person's immortal soul.

John Calvin believed that so firmly  
that some say he was a key party  
to a similar death for over fifty people –  
all in the name of Christianity! –  
all in the name of my beloved Jesus!

Was I the first Unitarian – when I questioned the Trinity?

Maybe I lit the spark for all of you who follow.

So why tell my story to people like you here and now?

The point is religious tolerance.

If I had to die,

I'm thankful that it sparked a strong movement  
for religious liberty and tolerance.

Even in your time there is a lot of religious bigotry  
and arrogance  
and religious violence.

It even appears among UU's at times!  
That's tragic!

But you as modern Unitarian Universalists  
have the unique role

of showing your community  
and the world  
how people of varied spiritual paths  
can live and work together  
in one religious community.

Jews, Muslims, Buddhists,  
Pagans, Christian, Unitarian  
and others

can live and learn from each other.

If you seriously work at that



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I will not have died in vain  
and you will be pioneers for a great new world!

Peace be with you all!

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