



“Unitarian Universalist Theologians I – Michael Servetus (1511-1553)”
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Sermon

St. Louis sits in the midst of two powerful forms of Christianity – Roman Catholicism and Evangelical Christianity: Roman Catholic, because St. Louis was established as a French outpost, and Evangelical Christianity because of later immigrations from Britain and New England. This means we are in the middle of a Catholic stronghold and on the edge of the Bible Belt. Because both Roman Catholicism and Evangelical Christianity are strong religious organizations, and can feel like the separation between church and state can get kind of thin. For a small denomination like ours, it can also be quite intimidating. We are few in number and thus small in influence, or so we think.

Today, in this first sermon in a series on Unitarian Universalist theology and theologians, we are talking about Michael Servetus, born in 1511, and seen by many as the first identifiable Unitarian theologian. He too found himself caught in the middle between a strong Catholic church that demanded uniformity, and an emerging Protestantism that challenged Catholic control even as it became rigid and unbending itself. And in this time, there was no separation between church and state. Not even the mightiest king could exercise authority without the blessing of the Pope. And no religious leader could get very far without political support. Religious power was political power and political power was religious power. Christianity and Empire had become the same thing.

This seemed the most natural thing in the world. The separation of church and state that we have today is a very modern concept. It hadn't existed in any culture before and seemed inconceivable.

Michael Servetus was born into this reality. Raised in Catholic Spain in a well to do family, he was taught that the interweaving of religion and politics was the natural order of things and he believed in its moral authority. This natural order was supported by theology, of course. There was God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit, all of the same substance, all God, three in one. It was the second part of the trinity, the Son that brought it all together. The Church was the Body of Christ, and as such, seen as having the central role in directing, explaining, and reinforcing the will of God on earth.

But to many, it seemed like things were getting out of control. Religious leaders were blessing political leaders not because they lead well, but because their blessings had been bought, usually at an exorbitant cost. Every political position, no matter how low, required a gift to the church, whether you paid off a priest, a bishop, an archbishop, or the pope himself. It went the other way too. You couldn't rise up the religious ranks without political support. Kings chose the bishops and archbishops in their state. Local political leaders assigned priests. This allowed politicians to stack religious positions with their own yes men and ensured that religious leaders would spin political agendas as god's will. Religious power was political power and political power was religious power. Christianity and Empire had become the same thing.

When Servetus was just six years old, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg and began the Protestant Reformation that would turn Europe on its head. A devout Catholic priest, Luther also believed in the church and its moral authority, but like many, was disillusioned by the church's corruption. It was all about money and power. You could buy indulgences from the church to gain absolution for sins committed in the past, present and future, or to shorten your time in purgatory. You could pay money to kiss the bones of saints, or to climb a set of sacred stairs. Luther had always assumed that this money went for the work of the church, but when he paid a visit to Rome, he saw that the money supported lavish lifestyles, personal egos, and political alliances. The church was in the business of taking from the poor and giving to the rich. Martin Luther was one of the first to cry foul. Little did he know what he would start. He had hoped for Reform. It soon became clear that the Roman Catholic Church was in no mood to entertain reform. The split began and caused a religious revolution unparalleled in human history.

Michael Servetus grew up in the midst of this schism. His father, a Spanish Catholic, was a staunch anti-reformist and sent his son to schools that had been recently purged of reform ideas, hoping to protect him from their heretical ideas. But, the harder the Catholic Church tried to suppress the new ideas, the stronger they became and the faster they spread, and nowhere did they spread faster than in the universities. Michael found himself in hotbeds of religious and intellectual dissent even in universities that had been supposedly cleansed of heresy. And he loved it. Michael was brilliant. By the age of sixteen he had learned Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, German, and Arabic. He was reading banned literature, like the Koran, and translated versions of the Bible not approved by the church, something you could be burned at the stake for. But still, he was a staunch Catholic with a deep faith.

And then, like Luther, he had a transforming moment. When Servetus was 18, he was sent into the service of a priest who served as the confessor of Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Charles had everything he wanted, except the blessing of the Pope, who had refused to give it no matter how much money Charles offered. Determined to get that blessing, Charles sent his army to Rome. The Tiber River filled with bodies. Every house was plundered and the Vatican was used as a stable. The looting, rape, torture and murder of Rome's people lasted nine months. The Pope finally agreed to bless Charles V. Servetus attended the celebration with his teacher. Nothing was spared at the lavish event and as the Pope was carried through the streets people bowed at his feet. Servetus, with his growing reformist ideals, was disgusted. This was no blessing from God. This was a politically charged event secured through unimaginable violence, then celebrated with shameless luxury. This was an offence to the heart of Christianity.

Like many Reformers, Servetus hungered for purity. The whole purpose of the Reformation was to return the church to a pure state. In his studies, Servetus found a Christianity so different from what was around him - a purer Christianity, a simpler message of pure love and forgiveness where the spirit of God was found in all. He learned from Erasmus that the only reference to the Trinity in the Bible happened in Latin translations approved by the church. 1 John 5:7 "For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one." Earlier Greek translations did not include this verse. Servetus concluded that the Trinity did not exist. For Servetus Jesus was indeed sacred, holy, sent by God, filled with the spirit of God. He had indeed died for the sins of humanity and been raised from the dead. But for Servetus, there was a big difference between Jesus being God and Jesus being of God. God created Jesus. Jesus was wholly the spirit of God, the fullest incarnation of God that humanity had ever seen, but not

the same as God himself. Servetus used the analogy of a beam of light. There is the source of the light, and then there is the beam of light that comes from the source. God is the source. Jesus is the beam.

Now this might just sound like semantics to us. I mean, really, what difference does it make? Well, if you changed the place of Jesus, you changed the place of the church. If Jesus was God, and if the Church is the body of Christ, then the Church becomes a piece of God, the word of God himself. But, if Jesus is not God but of God, then the church is not God but of God. The Church changes into a beam of light rather than the source of the light.

Servetus' understanding of the Trinity had huge ramifications for the place of the church in society. Servetus suggested that the Trinity had created the conditions for the church to make an idol of itself. The church had committed the sin of making itself into God. The church was worshipping itself, not God. And really, it was just worshipping the pursuit of power and wealth.

For Servetus, the true power of Christianity could not rest in a church, as important as the church was. The true power of Christianity rested in the individual conscience of each person, because all of humanity contained the spirit of God. As Jesus was the beam that emanated from the source, God taught us through Jesus that we too could progressively grow and mature and become a beam of light ourselves. For Servetus everything was sacred, everything was filled with the presence of God, and this meant that each individual could be the church.

If Servetus thought his ideas would be welcomed, he was wrong. When he published *On the Errors of the Trinity* in 1531 he was declared a heretic by Catholics and Protestants, and went underground for 22 years. But he couldn't stop writing, couldn't stop working on his ideas. As long as the abuses remained, he needed to speak against them. In 1553 he published a second book – *The Restoration of Christianity*. And this is what undid him. He was discovered in Geneva Switzerland by John Calvin, the main creator of the Protestant idea that we are all depraved and sinful. John hated Servetus' theology. He had Servetus arrested, tried for heresy, and burned alive at the stake, a copy of his new book chained to his ankle. Servetus was the first Reformer to be tried by another Reformer and executed for heresy.

And after his death, Calvin hoped that Servetus' ideas had died with him. But just as the Catholic church failed to kill the Reformation by killing those who taught it, the Reformers could not kill off those who challenged them. Jesus could not be undone by the Cross, Servetus could not be undone by the stake. His ideas were carried throughout Europe, landing in Poland and Transylvania, and a new denomination was born, Unitarianism. In this church they worshipped the one God, and loved Jesus as the one sent by God to manifest his truth in the world, a truth that each of them could become by living truthful, ethical, love filled lives.

Unitarianism has changed a lot since those early days, nowhere more than in North America, where we merged with Universalism and absorbed religious ideas from Transcendentalism, Deism, Humanism, Buddhism and Earth Centered spiritualities, to name a few. But one thing we have held onto is this idea that we should never allow any earthly thing to claim a monopoly on the sacred. The church is not God. We are not God. One person is not God. You can't make the ultimate that small. By the same token, we are all of

God, all of that spark of the divine that becomes more fully present through our lives. To use Servetus' theology, we're the beam of light, a conduit for the movement of the sacred in the world.

One of the challenges we face in Unitarian Universalism today is this: because we do not have a single understanding of God at the center of our faith, we often associate our religion primarily with our churches. Sometimes we end up worshipping our churches, which really means we're worshipping ourselves and what we have created. Not that we shouldn't celebrate what we have created, but we are about more than ourselves. Sometimes I think we're scared to point to something outside or higher than us because we're afraid that the God that we left behind when we came into Unitarian Universalism is going to follow us and trap us again. If you look around, it's pretty clear that in the last decades religion has once again become the tool of empire building in this country, and we're right to be wary of that kind of God, for that kind of god has nothing to do with God and everything to do with power and influence. I am reminded of a prayer by Servetus himself, "May the Lord destroy all the tyrants of the church. Amen."

But, I think we sell ourselves short if we allow other's misuse of God to hold us back from fully engaging our higher purpose. And this doesn't mean that all UUs should suddenly believe in God. What I mean is that we have to look beyond ourselves – and into the mystery, into the source. Otherwise, we may simply end up making this church into a default god. And then once again, it's all about us and what we want. And that makes us no different than the world out there which teaches us relentlessly, day after day, that the pursuit of our personal wants and needs is what life is about.

This winter, we are continuing the process of making real the promises we made to ourselves when the congregation approved a Mission and Vision Statement. You can find it in our literature and on our website. We've promised ourselves that we will develop the resources for exceptional worship, fellowship, life long learning and community service. In this process, it will be tempting for us to talk mostly about what we want. The more important question, though, is for what we are wanted and for what we are needed. Is worship about feeling really good on a Sunday morning, or for helping us embrace and live our values? Is lifelong learning about self actualization or about shaping ourselves into the servants of the world? In the coming months our Strategic Planning Team is going to speak to as many people as possible to hear your ideas, your hopes, and your wishes. So read the newsletter, the announcements, the weekly emails, and be watching for your opportunity to add your thoughts to this holy conversation.

Michael Servetus' legacy for us is simple. We still live in a world filled with false gods, some of whom we have created. Let us be very aware of the source and that we are the beam for that source. Let us be humble and honored in this sacred responsibility.