

Out of the Flames  
Led by Rev. Steven A. Protzman  
February 2, 2014  
Part I of a UU History Series

First Reading: An excerpt from "Out of the Flames"  
by Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone<sup>1</sup>  
Second Reading: "Sunrise" by Mary Oliver<sup>2</sup>

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*As the Protestant Reformation took hold in Europe and forever changed the course of western Christianity, an even more radical reformation was taking place, out of which Unitarianism in Poland and Transylvania would arise. It is a fascinating story that includes the invention of the printing press, the death by burning of proto-Unitarian Michael Servetus, and the rise of tolerance for diverse religious beliefs.*

There was a facebook post yesterday that asked: If someone from the 1500s suddenly appeared, what would be the most difficult thing to explain to them about modern life? The answer: I possess a device in my pocket that is capable of accessing every piece of information know to humankind but I use it to look at pictures of kittens and get into arguments with strangers. Earlier this week a member of this congregation asked me about today's sermon topic. When I told them it was about the rise of Unitarianism in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, they made a bet with me that I couldn't tie Pete Seeger into my sermon. I accepted of course! But before Seeger, a legendary American folk singer who died on Monday at the age of 94, makes his cameo appearance, we're going to take a journey of the imagination back to 16th century Europe. I'm going to tell you the story about the beginnings of Unitarianism in Europe.

Late Medieval Europe had been in the grips of a dark depression but in the last decades of the 1400s, a bold new spirit of exploration, of intellectual curiosity, of adventure and discovery swept Western civilization. UU scholar Charles Howe writes that "the bleakness and intellectual poverty of the Middle Ages was being left behind, and a rebirth of literature, the arts and science was taking place. The Renaissance, as this cultural rebirth was called, began with the revival of Classical learning by scholars known as Humanists, those who studied and based their philosophy on the Latin and Greek classics." Howe goes on to say that the development of Humanism and the growth of the Renaissance were greatly accelerated, and in part initiated, by Johann Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1453. Before then, books were very expensive and not readily available because they were either copied by hand by scribes or made by block printing, which was as time consuming and expensive as using a scribe. With literacy on the rise and a growing demand for books, publishers were eager to find a better, more efficient, more cost effective method of producing books. Gutenberg's method of using movable type was so elegant and so efficient that it would remain the prevalent printing technology for the next 400 years. The first book Gutenberg published was the Bible,

and it quickly became an object of Humanist study.<sup>3</sup> Scholars and theologians began not only reading the Bible and reinterpreting it, but they also wrote books on their ideas, disseminating points of view that could be radical, controversial, revolutionary or even heretical. Books became the modern device of the time to access all the information known to humankind.

Along with art and history and botany and architecture and medicine, people wrote about the pressing issues of the times. The church's doctrines, including the doctrine of the Trinity, were scrutinized; the scandalous state of the Catholic Church was a major and controversial topic among the laity and clergy. Charles Howe writes: "Matters were brought to a head on October 30th, 1517 when the monk Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther had originally meant only to promote a debate about what he saw as abuses in the Catholic Church's practice of granting indulgences, the means whereby a sinner's time in purgatory could be shortened by paying money to the church. In the controversy that followed, Luther ended up challenging both the authority of the church and the supremacy of the pope. The Reformation had begun."<sup>4</sup> But Luther had to tread carefully. David Bumbaugh writes: "Martin Luther was not eager to tamper with the fundamental dogmatic structures of the church. He did not want to be seen as a wild-eyed radical intent on bringing down the entire social edifice. Along with other reformers, he was concerned that too much tampering with Christianity could backfire. There is some reason to think that Luther preferred to give little attention to some of the more debatable doctrines, including the Doctrine of the Trinity, a doctrine not well supported in scripture."<sup>5</sup>

It is very possible that Luther and other early reformers might have remained silent on this doctrine had it not been for Michael Servetus. Servetus was born in the Kingdom of Aragon in September, 1511. His parents were both noble so he enjoyed the privileges of the nobility, including education. At a very young age, he could read the Bible in Greek and Hebrew, knew Latin and had read the church fathers. He was also profoundly influenced by the world in which he lived, a time in which the Catholic church enjoyed both spiritual and political power. Spain had been recently united under the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, who along with sending Columbus to the new world, drove close to a million non-Christians into exile from Spain. The Jews and Moslems who remained converted to Christianity to protect their homes and livelihoods. To deal with concerns about these converts, the Inquisition was formed to ensure orthodox beliefs and practices. The Church's greatest fear was that a heretic would lead others astray, thereby condemning their souls to eternal damnation. Those found guilty of the most serious heresies, including denying the Trinity, were condemned to die, usually by burning at the stake.

At the age of fifteen, Servetus went to the University of Toulouse in France to study law. He would never return to Spain. He soon left Toulouse to become the personal assistant of his former teacher, Juan de Quintana, who was the confessor of Emperor Charles V. After witnessing the exhibition of the Pope's power and luxury during the coronation of Charles in 1530, Servetus left the royal court in disgust and wandered around central Europe. In 1531 at the age of 20, Servetus published his first book, *De Trinitatis Erroribus*, "On the Errors of the Trinity", in which he managed to discredit the doctrine of

the Trinity. This book caused so much outrage among both Protestants and Catholics that Servetus published a second book, "Dialogues on the Trinity", to clarify what he thought had been misunderstood. This book created so much more protest and condemnation that Servetus decided to disappear. He appeared in Paris sometime later as Michel de Villeneuve where he studied medicine and then served as a doctor in the small French city of Vienne. As a physician, he figured out how pulmonary circulation works in the body. This discovery would be included in his last book, the book that caused his death, the Restitution of Christianity (Christianismi Restitutio, 1552). In this book Servetus argues that the church had fallen into false doctrine after 325 C.E. when the doctrine of the Trinity was established. He contended that Luther and the other reformers had not gone far enough in their reform of the Roman church. He insisted that the Trinity was a doctrine invented by Satan to confuse Christians and he likened it to a three-headed Cerberus, the mythical hellhound that guards the entrance to Hades. Servetus went on to define God as everywhere, the complete essence of all things. In the fashion of the radical Anabaptists, who sought to return Christianity to the practices of the early church, he insisted that baptism was a sign of repentance and renewal which must be a conscious choice and could not be accepted before the age of 20.<sup>6</sup>

Servetus sent a copy of his book to John Calvin, who had become the religious leader of the city of Geneva and had established a theocracy. Their arguments through a series of letters would later become legendary. Finally, Calvin angrily dismissed Servetus's requests for further discussions on religious subjects. "If this man ever comes to Geneva, he will not leave this city alive", he said to one of his assistants. Servetus published his third book anonymously, but was discovered by the French Inquisition and imprisoned. He managed to escape and went to Geneva, perhaps on his way to Italy to seek out the reformers there, or to have a final conversation with Calvin. While in church in Geneva, Servetus was recognized and arrested. Calvin had him tried and convicted of heresy and Michael Servetus, with his book strapped to his thigh, was burned at the stake in Geneva on the 27th of October, 1553. In the first reading, Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone tell us that the execution of Servetus is so significant because "it marked a turning point in the quest for freedom of expression. Although thousands had been executed for heresy before him and others would be executed after, the extraordinary nature of both Servetus the man and Servetus the representative of honest and passionate dissent rippled through Europe in ways that his enemies had never foreseen."<sup>7</sup>

After Servetus' death, Sebastian Castellio, a professor of Greek at the University of Basel, wrote a biting criticism of John Calvin: "If it is not blind rage to torture in the flames a man who not only is not convicted but not even accused of any crime, then there is no such thing as blind rage. To kill a man is not to protect a doctrine, but it is to kill a man. When Servetus fought with reasons and writings, he should have been repulsed by reasons and writings."<sup>8</sup> While all the writings of Calvin, Castellio and others did much to publicize Servetus's ideas, more importantly his death brought widespread attention to the idea of religious toleration. UU scholar David Bumbaugh, in his book Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History, wrote: "Servetus is part of the movement's mythic past and speaks across the centuries because of his stubborn refusal to be deflected from the truth as he saw it, even though all the world disagreed. His death not only gave Unitarians a martyr, but it provided the occasion on which Sebastian Castellio proclaimed

the great commitment to reason and tolerance in matters of religious conviction -a statement that makes him, perhaps more than Servetus, the forerunner of modern Unitarian Universalism.”<sup>9</sup> Servetus's criticisms of the doctrine of the Trinity also challenged others to consider the doctrine, which led to the rise of Unitarianism. His ideas strongly influenced a number of Italian Humanists, especially in Venice where a radical, anti-trinitarian, anabaptist movement was formed. At its high point in 1550 this movement consisted of a council and 60 congregations. When the Inquisition was established in Italy in 1542, these radical reformers dispersed. Many of them went first to Switzerland, including Giorgio Biandrata and Laelius Socinus, where there was an Italian congregation of Anabaptists. They escaped detection for some time because the services were in Italian but they were eventually found out. Socinus died in Basel but his nephew Faustus, who inherited Laelius' books and writings, would become a leader of the Unitarian movement in Poland. Biandrata went to Transylvania and become court physician to Queen Isabella, mother of the only Unitarian king in history, John Sigismund. The Polish Unitarian movement ended in 1660 when the Catholics drove them out of Poland. The Transylvanian Unitarians survive to this day, continuing the legacy of Servetus, Biandrata and all of the radical reformers.

Four hundred and fifty years later, we think ourselves free and we look with horror and sadness at how those who fought for the right to believe as they chose rather than conform to the prevailing orthodoxy were imprisoned, tortured and often killed in cruel ways. Are we really free though? As Pete Seeger's life reminds us, people are still expected to conform to religious creeds, dogma and orthodoxy or are pressured into blind, unquestioning loyalty as citizens of a country. Along with being a folk singer, Seeger was a political activist throughout his life. He was also a Unitarian Universalist even though he made it clear that he hated organized religion. Since we often describe ourselves as a disorganized religion, he apparently had no issues being a UU. In 1955 Seeger was questioned by the House Un-American Activities Committee. In a transcript of this questioning about Seeger's performances and allegiances, he is described as "skillfully tapdancing around the questions, often with humor, sometimes with protest, and refusing to use the Fifth Amendment as a literal get-out-of-jail-free card. Here is a quote from the transcript of his questioning:

"I am not going to answer any questions as to my association, my philosophical or religious beliefs or my political beliefs, or how I voted in any election, or any of these private affairs. I think these are very improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this. I would be very glad to tell you of my life if you want to hear of it. I feel that in my whole life I have never done anything of any conspiratorial nature. I resent very much and very deeply being called before this Committee and the implication that in some way because my opinions may be different from yours, that I am any less of an American than anybody else."<sup>10</sup>

He was eventually sentenced to a year in prison for contempt, a verdict he successfully appealed. Like Michael Servetus and many other Unitarians throughout history, Seeger refused to compromise his beliefs and stood his ground, stating that he was entitled to his own opinions and freedom of thought even though his truth came with a price. In the second reading Mary Oliver speaks of the power of living out your convictions: "What is

the name of the deep breath I would take over and over for all of us? Call it whatever you want, it is happiness, it is another one of the ways to enter fire."

What convictions do we hold that are worthy of our lives?

Mary Oliver's words also warn us that truth is dangerous: "You can die for it— an idea, or the world. People have done so, brilliantly, letting their small bodies be bound to the stake, creating an unforgettable fury of light."

What truths in your life are ultimately worth dying for?

As we celebrate our heritage of Unitarians and Universalists through the centuries, may their brilliant unforgettable fury of light continue to illuminate our way. May we pledge our lives anew this day to let our own fury of light blaze a trail for future generations as we move forward with the power of love proclaiming and living out the truth that makes us free.

#### References

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<sup>1</sup> Goldstone, Lawrence and Nancy, Out of the Flames, New York: Broadway Books, 2002, pp. 321-322.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/blog/2008/03/21/mary-oliver-sunrise/>

<sup>3</sup> Howe, Charles A., For Faith and Freedom: A Short History of Unitarianism in Europe, Boston: Skinner House Books, 1997, pg. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Howe, *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> Bumbaugh, David, Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History, Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2000, pg. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Bumbaugh, *Ibid.*, pg. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Goldstone, *Ibid.*, pp. 321-322.

<sup>8</sup> Howe, *Ibid.*, page 46.

<sup>9</sup> Bumbaugh, *Ibid.*, pg. 19.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.mediaite.com/online/heres-the-amazing-transcript-of-pete-seeger-pissing-off-the-house-un-american-activities-committee/>

Drivers on the M20 are facing 'significant delays' to traffic in both directions for two miles after a lorry burst into flames early this morning. Four fire engines and a water carrier were sent to the incident. Kent Police have also been called to the scene along with Highways England. A lorry caught on fire and blocked the London bound carriageway. There are no reported injuries and the cause is not yet known. All traffic is being temporarily held in both directions between junction 9 for A20 Fougères Way and junction 8 for the A20 Ashford Road. It added: 'Five fire engines and a bulk water carrier attended, and crews wearing breathing apparatus put the fire out using compressed air foam and a hose reel jet. There were no reported injuries and the cause is not yet known.' RELATED ARTICLES. The article tells the story of a 17-year-old girl who lived through the Triangle factory fire of 1911, helping students understand both the horror and the historical significance of this tragic event. Structure. The article weaves together narrative and informational passages and includes cause-and-effect and problem-and-solution structures. Show our video Behind the Scenes: Out of the Flames, in which author Kristin Lewis explains how she researched and wrote the article. Have students complete the video activity. Have students read the headline and subhead then look through the article's text features, paying special attention to the section headers. The old, print-friendly test Part 1 For questions 1-8, read the text below and decide which answer (A, B, C or D) best fits each gap. There is an example. He got out of a car about ten metres in front of me. It had taken me only a second to recognise who it was and he darted into the doorway of a closed shop to avoid coming face to face with him. When eventually he peeked out, he was standing on the pavement speaking on the phone. He had a long coat on over jeans and boots. His hair was cropped and his face was pale. He wasn't wearing his glasses and his free hand was cutting the air as if he was making points while talking. He was looking round but his attention was on the call. Suddenly, he brought it to an abrupt end and slipped the mobile He opened the door casually, but he seemed out of breath. A pink balloon was floating at his chest, attached by a ribbon to his arm. "Welcome!" he said, voice cracking. "Come in." "Thanks." The events of eight years ago shot through his mind in quick succession, tearing open the wounds. But as his mom spoke, they closed up again. "I was, for a while," she said, "but eventually my understanding of the circumstances left me with mostly sadness and, to be completely honest with you, Jackie, I still do get sad." She led the charge outside to the breezy spring air. She stepped off the patio and went to the driveway where her car, a cherry-red '87 Acura Integra, awaited her. She'd bought it in celebration of her Emmy, an indulgence well-earned. Only RUB 220.84/month. Reading "Out of the Flames". STUDY. Flashcards. a large building that has apartments or rooms for rent and that is usually in a poorer part of a city. You might also like Week 1 Vocab. 20 terms. jacksontorii. Vocabulary 1 - Nouns (09/08/2014). 20 terms. Bradley2014. Derivational Relations - Sort 7. 24 terms.