

## HEALING, MUTUALITY, AND HOPE

Michael Servetus, martyred for his Unitarian ideas in 1553, was an unsparing prophet. He challenged prevailing assumptions about the truth of Jesus Christ being God incarnate in the so-called Trinity and belief systems rather than ethical living as the keys to eternal life. Servetus was burned at the stake by John Calvin--a prophet burned by a pastor. Yet Unitarian minister Andrew Hill argues that Unitarians today owe more to Calvin than to Servetus. We can be uncomfortable with the challenges of prophets like Servetus, while our congregations are maintained more by the community building of pastors like Calvin. Yet the "prophethood of all believers," as Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams put it, may be the essential that might save us.

As Unitarian minister Richard Boeke notes, Servetus was stubborn and single-minded. He was not a "team player." He built no churches or religious communities. He was rather like a lonely but driven Don Quixote tilting at windmills of superstition and error. He followed the truth as he saw it even into the hell of being burned alive. But he left us what Boeke calls "a heritage of soul." His was a calling, like the calling of any ministry, to move beyond the givens, to think and to act "outside the box."

As a scientist, Servetus discovered the pulmonary circulation of the blood. As a religious seeker, he taught us to follow our breath, to escape the "box" of unexamined notions and supposed truths. As a boy, Servetus was puzzled why Jews and Moslems refused to accept the doctrine of the Trinity. Then he discovered that they affirmed the unity of God, against which tri-theism appeared a distortion. He also discovered that Mohammed had admitted Jesus as the greatest of the prophets who had gone before. When Servetus studied the Bible, he discovered, as had the great Humanist Erasmus shortly before, that there was no mention of a "trinity" in the Bible. Servetus dreamed that here was a basis for reconciling Christian, Moslem, and Jew – that they shared a mutual respect for worshiping the one God. Mutual respect inspired Francis David in Transylvania, who inspired King John Sigismund to proclaim that "there shall be no compulsion in matters of religion." The prophetic notion of mutual respect furthered by Servetus had come full circle, for it comes directly from the Qur'an.

Like Moslem Sufis, who find God everywhere, Servetus wrote that "it is my fundamental principle that all things are a part or portion of God and that the nature of things is the substantial spirit of God." Servetus experienced the Holy as a universal soul, animating all things. The Holy unites rather than divides. It is no longer "us versus them, but "us and them" united in the Holy. The third party in every encounter is the Holy, whether one calls it God or truth or love or by no words at all. Servetus, by his prophetic vision of the unity of the Holy, and his unflinching witness for it even to the stake, is the risk-taking that can heal, for the sense of the Holy that infuses and connects all may be, as Boeke suggests, "essential to the health of our own soul." Servetus was a lonely prophet, but his prophecy was a vision of healing, mutuality, and hope that sustains.

Ref: Rev. Richard Boeke, "Esperanza! Breathe in Hope and Exhale Anger," *The Inquirer*, August 12, 2006, pp. 8-9.