

Religion by the Numbers: 3
Taking a Second Look at the Trinity
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All of us gathered here today share a history with the number 3 as it relates to religious thought. The only reason that we are known as *Unitarian* Universalists is because our liberal religious ancestors parted ways with the mainstream Christian theology which viewed God as a Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons in one God; one *essence*. Orthodox Christianity became *Trinitarian*; our liberal religious ancestors were branded as heretics for being *Unitarian*.

The idea of God as a Trinity evolved slowly out of a particular understanding of a handful of Scriptural passages. Nowhere in the Bible is *Trinity* explicitly mentioned, nor are phrases like *one substance*, which was later used to describe the union of Father-God, Son-Jesus, and Holy Spirit. (Three persons; one substance.) Because of the lack of Scriptural evidence for such a theological leap; and because of the tortuous logic of trying to imagine three separate and distinct persons *without imagining* three Gods; our liberal religious ancestors spoke heatedly against such a doctrine as damaging the integrity of the very religion it claimed to support.

William Ellery Channing, in the famous sermon entitled "[Unitarian Christianity](#)" that Roland read from, says this:

We object to the doctrine of the Trinity, that, whilst acknowledging in words, it subverts in effect, the unity of God. According to this doctrine, there are three infinite and equal persons, possessing supreme divinity, called the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost... and when common Christians hear these persons spoken of as conversing with each other, loving each other, and performing different acts, how can they help regarding them as different beings, different minds?

We do, then, with all earnestness, though without reproaching our brethren, protest against the irrational and unscriptural doctrine of the Trinity.

It is a debate that seems quite distant from the lives of our congregations today. But lest we imagine that it was always and only quibbling over an arcane theological point, we should remember that in 325 CE at the Council of Nicea where these points were being debated, where the first articulations of a Trinity were being hammered out, it is reported that as our ancestor Arius rose to argue against this Trinitarian doctrine, he was punched in the nose by Nicholas, Bishop of Myra...

Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, who came to be known as St. Nicholas...

Yep, that's right: *St. Nicholas*. Our proud history includes a man *who was actually assaulted by Santa Claus*. You have to be one heck of a heretic to do that, right?

And though we can smile at that fleeting if unfair consequence of opposing Trinitarian doctrine, the other consequences of heresy were not nearly so humorous. As Christianity assumed its role as the religion of the state and embraced its institutional incarnation, the consequences for Arian and Unitarian

doctrines over the centuries have included exile (as Arius himself experienced), prison, torture...and even death. Death.

Michael Servetus lived from 1511 to 1553 (*information and quotations drawn from “[The Epic of Unitarianism](#): Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion* by David B. Parke). Reading the Bible as a young man, and witnessing the corruptions in the Catholicism of his day, he welcomed the Protestant Reformation as an opportunity to restore Christianity to the religion expressed by Jesus himself. He also saw it as an opportunity to rid Christianity of the doctrine of the Trinity, as it was nowhere supported in his reading of the Gospels and was rather, he felt, an unfortunate attempt to view Christianity through the confusing lens of Greek philosophy.

In accepting the doctrine of the Trinity, Servetus wrote, Christians “have become...[people] without any God. For as soon as we try to think about God, we are turned aside to three phantoms, so that no kind of unity remains in our conception. But what else is being without God but being unable to think about God, when there is always presented to our understanding a haunting kind of confusion of three beings, by which we are forever deluded into supposing that we are thinking about God.”

Being nothing if not direct, which helped to stoke the anger of men like John Calvin with whom Servetus carried on a lengthy correspondence, Servetus wrote of the Trinitarians: “They seem to be living in another world while they dream of such things; for the kingdom of heaven know none of this nonsense, and it is in another way, unknown to them, that Scripture speaks of the Holy Spirit...”

For just such comments, and for his unending persistence in freely stating and publishing his views on theology—even under threat of imprisonment; captured by the French Inquisition and escaping; mocked and derided by Protestant reformers who feared his radical views—because Servetus would not stop speaking passionately about the religion that he loved so dearly and sought to pass along in the purest form he could imagine, he was sentenced to death in Geneva at the hands of those who, in other circumstances, would have been tried as heretics themselves by the Catholic Church. The Protestant reformer, John Calvin, maybe seeking to show that he was as serious about doctrine as the Catholic Church had been, sought to silence Michael Servetus by the most extreme means possible. After angrily breaking off his correspondence with Servetus, Calvin wrote to a friend that if Servetus ever came to Geneva he would make sure that he did not leave the city alive.

He made good on his promise. Servetus boldly (foolishly, some might say) attended a service of Calvin’s and was captured, imprisoned, tried and sentenced to death.

This is from the sentence pronounced against Servetus by the Syndics of Geneva:

[W]e...judges of criminal cases in this city... judge that you, Servetus, have for a long time promulgated false and thoroughly heretical doctrine, despising all...corrections and that you have with malicious and perverse obstinacy sown and divulged even in printed books opinions against God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit...And you have had neither shame nor horror of setting yourself against...the Holy Trinity, and so you have obstinately tried to infect the world with your stinking heretical poison...For these and other reasons, desiring to purge the Church of God of such infection and cut off the rotten member, having taken counsel with our citizens and having invoked the name of God to give just judgment...speaking in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we now in writing give final sentence and condemn you, Michael Servetus, to be bound and...attached to a stake and burned with

your book to ashes. And so you shall finish your days and give an example to others who would commit the like.

Calvin made one plea of mercy on Servetus' behalf...He suggested that Servetus be beheaded with a sword rather than burned. His request was rejected. Servetus was burned at the stake with his book, *The Restitution of Christianity*, bound to his body. It was a long and painful death, and at one point Servetus cried out:

“O Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have pity on me!” An onlooker purportedly commented that if Servetus had been able to say “Eternal Son of God” rather than “Son of the Eternal God,” he may have been saved from the fire. That close. But Michael Servetus could not do it.

So where does that leave us today? Trinity Sunday was celebrated by many Christian churches last week...Am I suggesting we plan a big counter-celebration for next year? Am I attempting to convince you of the superiority of the historical Unitarian concept of God? Am I trying to out any Trinitarian believers who might be with us today?

No. No on all counts. After one of the history classes I led, a member asked if a Trinitarian Christian could be part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation today. My answer? Absolutely. They are and will be welcome here.

You see, the truly destructive piece of the history that I've shared does not lie within the doctrine of the Trinity; it lies within the way in which that doctrine was held, as unquestionable; as immovable; as Truth with a capital 'T,' so very important that it justified the pain, imprisonment, and even death of those who disagreed.

John Calvin did not repent of his part in the death of Servetus; indeed, he defended it:

Whoever shall maintain that wrong is done to heretics and blasphemers in punishing them makes himself an accomplice in their crime and guilty as they are...it is God who speaks, and clear it is what law he will have kept in the church...we spare not kin, nor blood of any, and forget all humanity when the matter is to combat for His glory.

The fault lies not in the concept of the Trinity, but in the confusion of a human *conception* of God with *God* and in the justification of the most brutal actions in the name of that God.

[Karen Armstrong](#) imagines a very different function for the doctrine of the Trinity; not to convince Christians that they hold the ultimate description of God, but rather to remind them that “the divine essence lay beyond their grasp.” In other words, that very confusing movement of Trinitarian doctrine that so frustrated our liberal religious ancestors, from one to three to one to three, can be used to remind us that we will never be able to rest, once and for all, on the definitive answer to the mystery of life.

And Christianity joins with many other religious and philosophical traditions in settling on the number three as a way into that mystery (*information drawn from [The Mystery of Numbers](#) by Annemarie Schimmel*):

Lao-Tzu, the great Taoist thinker, says: “The Tao produces unity, unity produces duality, duality produces trinity, and the triad produces all things.”

Ancient Sumerian deities, Anu, Enlil, and Ea correspond to heaven, air, and earth;

while ancient Babylon worshipped the astral deities of moon, sun and Venus (or Ishtar).

The mystery religion of Egypt consisted of Isis, Osiris, and their son (the savior) Horus;

Hinduism has the Trinity of Brahma (the creator), Shiva (the destroyer), and Vishnu (the sustainer);

Buddhists recognize the three jewels (sources of salvation, places of refuge) as the Buddha, the teachings (or the Dharma), and community (or Sangha).

The avowedly monotheistic Shiite Muslims express their devotion in a triune phrase:

“There is no God but God. Muhammad is the messenger of God. Ali is the friend of God.”

And we Unitarian Universalists seem drawn to groupings of three as we speak of “justice, equity and compassion” in our Principles and “justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love” in our Sources.

There is something about three.

Think about how often we read and hear groupings of three. David Bowman, of *Precise Edit*, writes:

Using a series of three helps the reader understand what you are writing, helps him or her organize the information mentally, and creates a sense of urgency. Using a series of more than three becomes a bit cumbersome and less easy to understand or organize. Using a series of two ideas simply doesn't have the same impact

(unless you are providing two contrasting statements like we just did).

Three is undoubtedly one of the more universally popular entries in this series of sermons, “Religion by the Numbers.” And it overflows the confines of theology to pervade a variety of disciplines and cultural expressions.

Good things come in threes; bad things come in threes.

How many blind mice?

Goldilocks and...how many bears?

Three strikes, you're out; three outs, get out in the field.

Solid, liquid, gas.

Length, height, width.

Past, present, future.

Morning, noon, and night.

Beginning, middle, end.

Which is my cue to find an ending for this sermon, I suppose.

As we ponder our own liberal religious history as it relates to the Trinity, I think it is important that we embrace our heretical roots and continue to challenge *any* doctrine that claims complete and uncontestable truth.

But in the spirit of open-hearted understanding, I trust that we will not confuse the doctrine itself with the harm which was done in its name. The Trinity can be seen as speaking to what is apparently a human tendency to describe things in threes. The doctrine of the Trinity may also have the purpose, as Karen Armstrong suggests, not unlike the Buddhist *koan* or the Hindu *brahmodya*, of deliberately frustrating our understanding not so that we will fearfully grasp onto it tighter in the name of faith, but so that we may confront the fact that no such doctrine sufficiently explains ultimate reality. It reminds us that, face to face with the mystery of life, we will never be able to understand, articulate or communicate it perfectly, but that it is another innate human tendency to never give up the effort.