

DID UU KNOW?

Ambulatory Luminaries

Did you ever notice that the numerous rooms off the Ambulatory of our church are named after (you might have guessed) various Unitarian or Universalist luminaries? This is the first of several articles that will attempt to shine a light on who these Ambulatory Luminaries were and why they merit the honor of being named to these locations.

Michael Servetus 1511-1553 (Ambulatory Room 13) by Toni Gold

The first of our luminaries, Michael Servetus, was an anti-trinitarian, but not the earliest or the latest, by any means..

In 313 C.E. the Roman emperor Constantine legalized the rapidly-growing early Christian movement. In 325 C.E. the Emperor convened the Council of Nicea, the first empire-wide confab of early Christians. It was called in part to settle the pressing question of the nature of Jesus and his relationship to God. Ultimately the Council endorsed the notion of the Trinity — the idea that God is three — father, son and holy ghost. While this concept has no documentation in Scripture, that didn't stop passionate early Christians. Trinitarianism won the day and became the central tenet of the early church. Today, the Nicene Creed, or the similar Apostle's Creed, is spoken as a statement of belief during each service in most Christian churches, both Roman Catholic and Protestant.

Despite the affirmation of the Trinity at the Council of Nicea, the anti-trinitarian position of Arius, a Greek theologian who believed that Jesus was more than human but denied that he was equal to or coexistent with God — retained many followers. "Arianism" persisted for well over a thousand years, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and became one of the more radical strains in the early Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. Notice from the dates that the roots of Unitarianism are very deep.

Enter this fellow Michael Servetus, who became a martyr to the cause of Arianism.

Born in 1511 in Spain, Servetus was a brilliant multi-lingual theologian, physician, cartographer, and Renaissance humanist, who, at the age of 20, wrote On the Errors of the Trinity (in Latin of course). Pursued for his heresy by the Inquisition, the arm of the Church that enforced orthodoxy, he escaped twice, took an assumed name and continued to write and seek theological argumentation. Never shy, he sought to debate John Calvin, a leading Protestant reformer, but ultimately alienated him; Calvin was instrumental in his demise by reporting him to the Inquisition. Servetus was burned at the stake in Geneva, along with his books, in 1553.

Who knew that Unitarians had heretics and martyrs?

Widespread reaction to Servetus' death has been taken as signaling the birth in Europe of the idea of religious tolerance, a principle now more important to modern Unitarian Universalists than anti-trinitarianism. The radical search for truth and the right to freedom of conscience are Servetus' main legacies, rather than his theology. The Polish-American scholar, Marian Hillar,

has studied the evolution of freedom of conscience, from Servetus and the Polish Socinians, to John Locke, Thomas Jefferson and the American Declaration of Independence. According to Hillar: "Historically speaking, Servetus died so that freedom of conscience could become a civil right in modern society."
