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SEEK THE TRUTH AND SERVE HUMANITY



**A**bove all else, Unitarians hold dear the principles of social justice, democratic rights, freedom of thought and association and human rights generally. These are the rights that the Western world and some Tibetan leaders claim are being denied them by the Chinese government. Indeed, an orchestrated campaign is being waged around the world calling for human rights for the Tibetan people. So what should our attitude be to this campaign?

Well, another principle that Unitarians hold dear is that of the search for truth and reason in debate, so it is these tools that we need to use in developing our attitude to the hysteria being generated about Tibet by the world's media.

Attitudes to Tibet are generally influenced by the prevailing view that prior to the Chinese government moving into Tibet that the Tibetan people lived in a kind of Shangri La ruled over by benevolent Tibetan monks. In fact, any genuine historical analysis would show this to be quite mythical. Many visitors to Tibet as far back as 1895 expressed their views in print. Dr A Waddell, an Englishman, wrote at that time that the populace was 'under the intolerable tyranny of monks and the devil superstitions they had fashioned to terrorise the people'. In 1904, another English traveller, Captain WFT O'Connor, observed that 'the great landowners and the priests exercise each in their own dominion a despotic power from which there is no appeal' and that the people are 'oppressed by the most monstrous growth of monasticism and priest craft'.

Michael Parenti, internationally recognised American author and lecturer, said in his contemporary material

*Friendly Feudalism the Tibet Myth* 'As much as we might wish otherwise, feudal theocratic Tibet was a far cry from the romanticized Shangri La so enthusiastically nurtured by Buddhism's western proselytes'. He goes on to say, 'What happened to Tibet after the Chinese Communists moved into the country in 1951? The treaty of that year provided for ostensible self-governance under the Dalai Lama's rule but gave China military control and exclusive rights to conduct foreign relations. The Chinese were also granted a direct role in internal administration "to promote social reforms". Among the earliest changes they wrought were the abolition of slavery and the Tibetan serfdom system of unpaid labor. They eliminated many crushing taxes, started work projects, greatly reduced unemployment and beggary. They established secular schools thus breaking the educational monopoly of the monasteries and they constructed running water and electrical systems in Lhasa'.

Ironically, the 14th Dalai Lama was installed in Lhasa with an armed escort of Chinese troops and an attending Chinese minister in accordance with centuries-old tradition. What upset the Tibetan lords and lamas in the early 1950s was that these latest Chinese were Communists. At the risk of sounding cynical, there is also the fact that Tibet has the world's largest reserve of uranium as well as gold, copper, large quantities of oil and gas.

So, before making a decision on the rights and wrongs of the Chinese role in Tibet, one needs to do more than just listen to the views of the Western media and the discontent of former Tibetan landlords and study the real history of Tibet and its past.

# Friendly Feudalism: *The Tibet Myth* - Part One

by Michael Parenti

## I. For Lords and Lamas

Along with the blood-drenched landscape of religious conflict there is the experience of inner peace and solace that every religion promises, none more so than Buddhism. Standing in marked contrast to the intolerant savagery of other religions, Buddhism is neither fanatical nor dogmatic – so say its adherents. For many of them Buddhism is less a theology and more a meditative and investigative discipline intended to promote an inner harmony and enlightenment while directing us to a path of right living. Generally, the spiritual focus is not only on oneself but on the welfare of others. One tries to put aside egoistic pursuits and gain a deeper understanding of one's connection to all people and things. 'Socially engaged Buddhism' tries to blend individual liberation

The brawls damaged the main Buddhist sanctuaries and left dozens of monks injured, some seriously. The Korean public appeared to disdain both factions, feeling that no matter what side took control, 'it would use worshippers' donations for luxurious houses and expensive cars'.<sup>2</sup>

As with any religion, squabbles between or within Buddhist sects are often fuelled by the material corruption and personal deficiencies of the leadership. For example, in Nagano, Japan, at Zenkoji, the prestigious complex of temples that has hosted Buddhist sects for more than 1,400 years, 'a nasty battle' arose between Komatsu the chief priest and the Tacchu, a group of temples nominally under the chief priest's sway. The Tacchu monks accused Komatsu of selling writings and drawings under the temple's name for his own gain. They also were appalled

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by the frequency with which he was seen in the company of women. Komatsu in turn sought to isolate and punish monks who were critical of his

with responsible social action in order to build an enlightened society.

A glance at history, however, reveals that not all the many and widely varying forms of Buddhism have been free of doctrinal fanaticism, nor free of the violent and exploitative pursuits so characteristic of other religions. In Sri Lanka there is a legendary and almost sacred recorded history about the triumphant battles waged by Buddhist kings of yore. During the twentieth century, Buddhists clashed violently with each other and with non-Buddhists in Thailand, Burma, Korea, Japan, India, and elsewhere. In Sri Lanka, armed battles between Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils have taken many lives on both sides. In 1998 the US State Department listed thirty of the world's most violent and dangerous extremist groups. Over half of them were religious, specifically Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist.<sup>1</sup>

In South Korea, in 1998, thousands of monks of the Chogye Buddhist order fought each other with fists, rocks, firebombs, and clubs, in pitched battles that went on for weeks. They were vying for control of the order, the largest in South Korea, with its annual budget of \$9.2 million, its millions of dollars worth of property, and the privilege of appointing 1,700 monks to various offices.

leadership. The conflict lasted some five years and made it into the courts.<sup>3</sup>

But what of Tibetan Buddhism? Is it not an exception to this sort of strife? And what of the society it helped to create? Many Buddhists maintain that, before the Chinese crackdown in 1959, old Tibet was a spiritually oriented kingdom free from the egotistical lifestyles, empty materialism, and corrupting vices that beset modern industrialised society. Western news media, travel books, novels, and Hollywood films have portrayed the Tibetan theocracy as a veritable Shangri-La. The Dalai Lama himself stated that 'the pervasive influence of Buddhism' in Tibet, 'amid the wide open spaces of an unspoiled environment resulted in a society dedicated to peace and harmony. We enjoyed freedom and contentment'.<sup>4</sup>

A reading of Tibet's history suggests a somewhat different picture. 'Religious conflict was commonplace in old Tibet', writes one western Buddhist practitioner. 'History belies the Shangri-La image of Tibetan lamas and their followers living together in mutual tolerance and nonviolent goodwill. Indeed, the situation was quite different. Old Tibet was much more like Europe during the religious wars of the Counterreformation'.<sup>5</sup> In the thirteenth century, Emperor Kublai Khan created the

first Grand Lama, who was to preside over all the other lamas as might a pope over his bishops. Several centuries later, the Emperor of China sent an army into Tibet to support the Grand Lama, an ambitious 25-year-old man, who then gave himself the title of Dalai (Ocean) Lama, ruler of all Tibet. Here is a historical irony: the first Dalai Lama was installed by a Chinese army.

His two previous lama 'incarnations' were then retroactively recognised as his predecessors, thereby transforming the 1st Dalai Lama into the 3rd Dalai Lama. This 1st (or 3rd) Dalai Lama seized monasteries that did not belong to his sect, and is believed to have destroyed Buddhist writings that conflicted with his claim to divinity. The Dalai Lama who succeeded him pursued a sybaritic life, enjoying many mistresses, partying with friends, and acting in other ways deemed unfitting for an incarnate deity. For these transgressions he was murdered by his priests. Within 170 years, despite their recognised divine status, five Dalai Lamas were killed by their high priests or other courtiers.<sup>6</sup>

For hundreds of years competing Tibetan Buddhist sects engaged in bitterly violent clashes and summary executions. In 1660, the 5th Dalai Lama was faced with a rebellion in Tsang province, the stronghold of the rival Kagyu sect with its high lama known as the Karmapa. The 5th Dalai Lama called for harsh retribution against the rebels, directing the Mongol army to obliterate the male and female lines, and the offspring too 'like eggs smashed against rocks... In short, annihilate any traces of them, even their names'.<sup>7</sup>

In 1792, many Kagyu monasteries were confiscated and their monks were forcibly converted to the Gelug sect (the Dalai Lama's denomination). The Gelug school, known also as the 'Yellow Hats', showed little tolerance or willingness to mix their teachings with other Buddhist sects. In the words of one of their traditional prayers: 'Praise to you, violent god of the Yellow Hat teachings/who reduces to particles of dust/great beings, high officials and ordinary people/who pollute and corrupt the Gelug doctrine'.<sup>8</sup> An eighteenth-century memoir of a Tibetan general depicts sectarian strife among Buddhists that is as brutal and bloody as any religious conflict might be.<sup>9</sup> This grim history remains largely unvisited by present-day followers of Tibetan Buddhism in the West.

Religions have had a close relationship not only with violence but with economic exploitation. Indeed, it is often the economic exploitation that necessitates the violence. Such was the case with the Tibetan theocracy. Until 1959, when the Dalai Lama last presided over Tibet, most of the arable land was still organised into manorial estates worked by serfs. These estates were owned by two social groups: the rich secular landlords and the rich theocratic lamas. Even a writer sympathetic to the old order allows that 'a great deal of real estate belonged to the monasteries, and most of them amassed great riches'. Much of the wealth was accumulated 'through active participation in trade, commerce, and money lending'.<sup>10</sup>

Drepung monastery was one of the biggest landowners in the world, with its 185 manors, 25,000 serfs, 300 great pastures, and 16,000 herdsmen. The wealth of the monasteries rested in the hands of small numbers of high-ranking lamas. Most ordinary monks lived modestly

and had no direct access to great wealth. The Dalai Lama himself 'lived richly in the 1000-room, 14-story Potala Palace'.<sup>11</sup>

Secular leaders also did well. A notable example was the commander-in-chief of the Tibetan army, a member of the Dalai Lama's lay Cabinet, who owned 4,000 square kilometers of land and 3,500 serfs.<sup>12</sup> Old Tibet has been misrepresented by some Western admirers as 'a nation that required no police force because its people voluntarily observed the laws of karma'.<sup>13</sup> In fact, it had a professional army, albeit a small one, that served mainly as a gendarmerie for the landlords to keep order, protect their property, and hunt down runaway serfs.

Young Tibetan boys were regularly taken from their peasant families and brought into the monasteries to be trained as monks. Once there, they were bonded for life. Tashi-Tsering, a monk, reports that it was common for peasant children to be sexually mistreated in the monasteries. He himself was a victim of repeated rape, beginning at age nine.<sup>14</sup> The monastic estates also conscripted children for lifelong servitude as domestics, dance performers, and soldiers.

In old Tibet there were small numbers of farmers who subsisted as a kind of free peasantry, and perhaps an additional 10,000 people who composed the 'middle-class' families of merchants, shopkeepers, and small traders. Thousands of others were beggars. There also were slaves, usually domestic servants, who owned nothing. Their offspring were born into slavery.<sup>15</sup> The majority of the rural population were serfs. Treated little better than slaves, the serfs went without schooling or medical care. They were under a lifetime bond to work the lord's land – or the monastery's land – without pay, to repair the lord's houses, transport his crops, and collect his firewood. They were also expected to provide carrying animals and transportation on demand.<sup>16</sup> Their masters told them what crops to grow and what animals to raise. They could not get married without the consent of their lord or lama. And they might easily be separated from their families should their owners lease them out to work in a distant location.<sup>17</sup>

As in a free labor system and unlike slavery, the overlords had no responsibility for the serf's maintenance and no direct interest in his or her survival as an expensive piece of property. The serfs had to support themselves. Yet as in a slave system, they were bound to their masters, guaranteeing a fixed and permanent workforce that could neither organise nor strike nor freely depart as might labourers in a market context. The overlords had the best of both worlds.

One 22-year-old woman, herself a runaway serf, reports: 'Pretty serf girls were usually taken by the owner as house servants and used as he wished'; they 'were just slaves without rights'.<sup>18</sup> Serfs needed permission to go anywhere. Landowners had legal authority to capture those who tried to flee. One 24-year-old runaway welcomed the Chinese intervention as a 'liberation'. He testified that under serfdom he was subjected to incessant toil, hunger, and cold. After his third failed escape, he was mercilessly beaten by the landlord's men until blood poured from his nose and mouth. They then poured alcohol and caustic soda on his wounds to increase the pain, he claimed.<sup>19</sup>

The serfs were taxed upon getting married, taxed for the birth of each child and for every death in the family. They were taxed for planting a tree in their yard and for keeping animals. They were taxed for religious festivals and for public dancing and drumming, for being sent to prison and upon being released. Those who could not find work were taxed for being unemployed, and if they travelled to another village in search of work, they paid a passage tax. When people could not pay, the monasteries lent them money at 20 to 50 per cent interest. Some debts were handed down from father to son to grandson. Debtors who could not meet their obligations risked being cast into slavery.<sup>20</sup>

The theocracy's religious teachings buttressed its class order. The poor and afflicted were taught that they had brought their troubles upon themselves because of their wicked ways in previous lives. Hence they had to accept the misery of their present existence as a karmic atonement and in anticipation that their lot would improve in their next lifetime. The rich and powerful treated their good fortune as a reward for, and tangible evidence of, virtue in past and present lives.

The Tibetan serfs were something more than superstitious victims, blind to their own oppression. As we have seen, some ran away; others openly resisted, sometimes suffering dire consequences. In feudal Tibet, torture and mutilation - including eye gouging, the pulling out of tongues, hamstringing, and amputation - were favoured punishments inflicted upon thieves, and runaway or resistant serfs. Journeying through Tibet in the 1960s, Stuart and Roma Gelder interviewed a former serf, Tsering Wang Tui, who had stolen two sheep belonging to a monastery. For this he had both his eyes gouged out and his hand mutilated beyond use. He explains that he no longer is a Buddhist: 'When a holy lama told them to blind me I thought there was no good in religion'.<sup>21</sup> Since it was against Buddhist teachings to take human life, some offenders were severely lashed and then 'left to God' in the freezing night to die. 'The parallels between Tibet and medieval Europe are striking', concludes Tom Grunfeld in his book on Tibet.<sup>22</sup>

In 1959, Anna Louise Strong visited an exhibition of torture equipment that had been used by the Tibetan overlords. There were handcuffs of all sizes, including small ones for children, and instruments for cutting off noses and ears, gouging out eyes, breaking off hands, and hamstringing legs. There were hot brands, whips, and special implements for disembowelling. The exhibition presented photographs and testimonies of victims who had been blinded or crippled or suffered amputations for thievery. There was the shepherd whose master owed him a reimbursement in yuan and wheat but refused to pay. So he took one of the master's cows; for this he had his hands severed. Another herdsman, who opposed having his wife taken from him by his lord, had his hands broken off. There were pictures of Communist activists with noses and upper lips cut off, and a woman who was raped and then had her nose sliced away.<sup>23</sup>

Earlier visitors to Tibet commented on the theocratic despotism. In 1895, an Englishman, Dr A L Waddell, wrote that the populace was under the 'intolerable tyranny of monks' and the devil superstitions they had fashioned to terrorise the people. In 1904 Percival Landon described the Dalai Lama's rule as 'an engine of oppression'. At about that time, another English

traveller, Captain W F T O'Connor, observed that 'the great landowners and the priests ... exercise each in their own dominion a despotic power from which there is no appeal', while the people are 'oppressed by the most monstrous growth of monasticism and priest-craft'. Tibetan rulers 'invented degrading legends and stimulated a spirit of superstition' among the common people. In 1937, another visitor, Spencer Chapman, wrote, 'The Lamaist monk does not spend his time in ministering to the people or educating them ... The beggar beside the road is nothing to the monk. Knowledge is the jealously guarded prerogative of the monasteries and is used to increase their influence and wealth'.<sup>24</sup> As much as we might wish otherwise, feudal theocratic Tibet was a far cry from the romanticised Shangri La so enthusiastically nurtured by Buddhism's western proselytes.

## II. Secularization vs. Spirituality

What happened to Tibet after the Chinese Communists moved into the country in 1951? The treaty of that year provided for ostensible self-governance under the Dalai Lama's rule but gave China military control and exclusive right to conduct foreign relations. The Chinese were also granted a direct role in internal administration "to promote social reforms." Among the earliest changes they wrought was to reduce usurious interest rates, and build a few hospitals and roads. At first, they moved slowly, relying mostly on persuasion in an attempt to effect reconstruction. No aristocratic or monastic property was confiscated, and feudal lords continued to reign over their hereditarily bound peasants. "Contrary to popular belief in the West," claims one observer, the Chinese "took care to show respect for Tibetan culture and religion."<sup>25</sup>

Over the centuries the Tibetan lords and lamas had seen Chinese come and go, and had enjoyed good relations with Generalissimo Chiang Kaishek and his reactionary Kuomintang rule in China.<sup>26</sup> The approval of the Kuomintang government was needed to validate the choice of the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama. When the current 14th Dalai Lama was first installed in Lhasa, it was with an armed escort of Chinese troops and an attending Chinese minister, in accordance with centuries-old tradition. What upset the Tibetan lords and lamas in the early 1950s was that these latest Chinese were Communists. It would be only a matter of time, they feared, before the Communists started imposing their collectivist egalitarian schemes upon Tibet.

The issue was joined in 1956-57, when armed Tibetan bands ambushed convoys of the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army. The uprising received extensive assistance from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), including military training, support camps in Nepal, and numerous airlifts.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile in the United States, the American Society for a Free Asia, a CIA-financed front, energetically publicized the cause of Tibetan resistance, with the Dalai Lama's eldest brother, Thubtan Norbu, playing an active role in that organization. The Dalai Lama's second-eldest brother, Gyalo Thondup, established an intelligence operation with the CIA as early as 1951. He later upgraded it into a CIA-trained guerrilla unit whose recruits parachuted back into Tibet.<sup>28</sup>

Many Tibetan commandos and agents whom the CIA dropped into the country were chiefs of aristocratic clans or the sons of chiefs. Ninety percent of them were

never heard from again, according to a report from the CIA itself, meaning they were most likely captured and killed.<sup>29</sup> “Many lamas and lay members of the elite and much of the Tibetan army joined the uprising, but in the main the populace did not, assuring its failure,” writes Hugh Deane.<sup>30</sup> In their book on Tibet, Ginsburg and Mathos reach a similar conclusion: “As far as can be ascertained, the great bulk of the common people of Lhasa and of the adjoining countryside failed to join in the fighting against the Chinese both when it first began and as it progressed.”<sup>31</sup> Eventually the resistance crumbled.

Whatever wrongs and new oppressions introduced by the Chinese after 1959, they did abolish slavery and the Tibetan serfdom system of unpaid labor. They eliminated the many crushing taxes, started work projects, and greatly reduced unemployment and beggary. They established secular schools, thereby breaking the educational monopoly of the monasteries. And they constructed running water and electrical systems in Lhasa.<sup>32</sup>

Heinrich Harrer (later revealed to have been a sergeant in Hitler’s SS) wrote a bestseller about his experiences in Tibet that was made into a popular Hollywood movie. He reported that the Tibetans who resisted the Chinese “were predominantly nobles, semi-nobles and lamas; they were punished by being made to perform the lowliest tasks, such as laboring on roads and bridges. They were further humiliated by being made to clean up the city before the tourists arrived.” They also had to live in a camp originally reserved for beggars and vagrants - all of which Harrer treats as sure evidence of the dreadful nature of the Chinese occupation.<sup>33</sup>

By 1961, Chinese occupation authorities expropriated the landed estates owned by lords and lamas. They distributed many thousands of acres to tenant farmers and landless peasants, reorganizing them into hundreds of communes - herds once owned by nobility were turned over to collectives of poor shepherds. Improvements were made in the breeding of livestock, and new varieties of vegetables and new strains of wheat and barley were introduced, along with irrigation improvements, all of which reportedly led to an increase in agrarian production.<sup>34</sup>

Many peasants remained as religious as ever, giving alms to the clergy. But monks who had been conscripted as children into the religious orders were now free to renounce the monastic life, and thousands did, especially the younger ones. The remaining clergy lived on modest government stipends and extra income earned by officiating at prayer services, weddings, and funerals.<sup>35</sup>

Both the Dalai Lama and his advisor and youngest brother, Tenzin Choegyal, claimed that “more than 1.2 million Tibetans are dead as a result of the Chinese occupation.”<sup>36</sup> The official 1953 census - six years before the Chinese crackdown - recorded the entire population residing in Tibet at 1,274,000.<sup>37</sup> Other census counts put the population within Tibet at about two million. If the Chinese killed 1.2 million in the early 1960s then almost all of Tibet, would have been depopulated, transformed into a killing field dotted with death camps and mass graves - of which we have no evidence. The thinly distributed Chinese force in Tibet could not have rounded up, hunted down, and exterminated that many people even if it had spent all its time doing nothing else.

Chinese authorities claim to have put an end to floggings, mutilations, and amputations as a form of criminal punishment. They themselves, however, have been charged with acts of brutality by exiled Tibetans. The authorities do admit to “mistakes,” particularly during the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution when the persecution of religious beliefs reached a high tide in both China and Tibet. After the uprising in the late 1950s, thousands of Tibetans were incarcerated. During the Great Leap Forward, forced collectivization and grain farming were imposed on the Tibetan peasantry, sometimes with disastrous effect on production. In the late 1970s, China began relaxing controls “and tried to undo some of the damage wrought during the previous two decades.”<sup>38</sup>

In 1980, the Chinese government initiated reforms reportedly designed to grant Tibet a greater degree of self-rule and self-administration. Tibetans would now be allowed to cultivate private plots, sell their harvest surpluses, decide for themselves what crops to grow, and keep yaks and sheep. Communication with the outside world was again permitted, and frontier controls were eased to permit some Tibetans to visit exiled relatives in India and Nepal.<sup>39</sup> By the 1980s many of the principal lamas had begun to shuttle back and forth between China and the exile communities abroad, “restoring their monasteries in Tibet and helping to revitalize Buddhism there.”<sup>40</sup>

**PART TWO CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE**

## ALTERNATIVE ANZAC DAY

An alternative Anzac Day Commemoration was held at the Melbourne Unitarian Peace Memorial Church on Anzac Day organised by Val Noone and others. It was a wonderful occasion, with music, audio-visual presentations and poems and over 100 people attended and commemorated those who died in war and pledged to continue to fight for an alternative to war. This is what Anzac Day should be about. Not the glorification of war, but a quiet determination to end all wars. The ceremony opened with a minute’s silence for Indigenous Australian victims of invasion.

Speakers at the Alternative Anzac Day spoke about the treatment of returned Anzacs, of having relations die in both World Wars and Vietnam, of the costs of war, reflections of a Vietnam veteran, of the reconciliation between Vietnam veterans and protesters, of the mistreatment of nuclear veterans and of the Australian Peace Movement.

It was a moving and honest assessment of war and its impact on the people who fight and those who stay at home.

We hope that this will be a permanent and growing commemoration of Anzac Day in the real Australian tradition.

Congratulations to those who organised it and those who participated.

# Why I am a Humanist

by Des Young

Source: WA Humanist News Autumn 2008

***I wasn't born with the Humanist philosophy.*** It took me a long time to develop it and I only joined the Humanist Society of WA almost a year ago at the age of sixty-seven. I have seldom felt more comfortable with a group of people than with the members of this Society. We have a general common philosophy that is stated on the membership form but there is a great deal of room for individual thought and a great freedom to speak one's mind on any subject without fear of hostility.

**H**ow did I get to this point? Well, I was the fifth of five children in a farming family. My mother was Catholic from a poor Irish family in which one brother was a priest and one sister was a nun and the word of the Church was law. My father was an unwilling convert to Catholicism for the purpose of marriage. It was not that he had an alternative religion, nor any intellectual or philosophical denial of religious belief. It was more a case of finding the dictates of the priests inconvenient and presumptuous. He was not a strong character and the degree of resistance to the Church's imposts varied according to his mood and the stage of his life.

We children all commenced our education at the local government school and later were sent to Catholic schools. My elder brother went to Aquinas College, the leading Catholic college in WA. My three sisters went to convents. At the age of nine I was sent to a Catholic convent at Gooseberry Hill that was known as Mary's Mount Convent.

The nuns were a mixture of Australian born and Irish imports. We children soon learned to fear and hate most of those with the pink and white complexions and Irish accents. Much later in life I have sometimes wondered about these poor unhappy young women. Were they the surplus girls from large, poor Irish families who were coaxed or forced into convents when the marriage alternative did not arise soon enough to prevent the danger of mortal sin and illegitimate children? It is hard to know. What I do know is that they had minimal education and a disposition towards the administration of very harsh punishments that would be a major scandal if such things were to occur anywhere in WA these days. After one year there I protested to my parents that I was willing to go anywhere at all for my schooling as long as they did not send me back to Mary's Mount Convent. I was allowed to return to the nearby government school one year behind in my education. Fortunately, I soon made up the gap. When I was ten we moved to Perth midway through the school year and for a few months I

was able to attend a government school at Swanbourne. I enjoyed it very much but the dictates of the Catholic Church required that I commence the following year at Christian Brothers' College that then occupied a site in St George's Terrace, Perth.

What were the Christian Brothers like? Well, I have fond memories of nearly all of them. A couple of them were simple-minded bashers but they were definitely a minority. I recollect decent, self-sacrificing, hardworking young men who seriously believed in the dogma of the Catholic Church and had given their lives to trying to save their own souls and ours as well.

They received no pay and taught large, all-boy classes with a minimum of facilities. With only a few exceptions, the standard of education was equal to that of the government schools.

Discipline was tough but generally fair. In recent times we have heard of cases of Christian Brothers engaging in sexual abuse of boys in their care. I can recall only one of them who showed such a tendency and I do not know the extent to which he indulged it. I was often punished for misbehaviour but I was never subjected to sexual abuse and I have no direct knowledge of any other cases. I sometimes think back and feel a little sad for those Brothers who gave so much to an organisation that only offered false promises in return.

Until I was about fifteen I took seriously all the dogma of the Catholic Church. I believed there was a God who had made the world. I believed in Heaven and Hell, the assumption of the Virgin Mary, and the resurrection of Christ. I believed in mortal and venial sin. I believed that the Pope speaking *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals was infallible. I believed in the Holy Trinity and in miracles. I went to church and confession and Holy Communion as often as I could. I was anxious to ensure that if I died I would be in a 'state of grace' and go to Heaven and even more anxious to avoid going to Hell, that place of eternal pain and suffering.

Somewhere around the age of sixteen I began to change the direction of my thoughts. I think the main reason for the change was the result of the intellectual skills the Brothers were inculcating along with the subject matter they were teaching, particularly in the science subjects. Physics, chemistry and maths were all part of the curriculum. We were taught scientific method, the formation and testing of hypotheses, including the search for evidence. We were taught to reject the hypothesis that did not stand up to the evidence. I took all of this seriously also and started to ponder the truthfulness of Catholic dogma and the various stories of saints, miracles, etc. There was much to ponder:

- *Was there a Garden of Eden?*
- *How did we all manage to descend from Adam and Eve and what did the apple represent?*
- *Was there a supreme being who created the world?*
- *If the world needed a creator, why didn't this Supreme Being also need one?*
- *If the Supreme Being didn't need a creator, why did the world need one?*
- *Was Christ's Mother really a virgin and why was that important anyway?*
- *Why were we deemed to be stained with original sin even at birth?*
- *How did the crucifixion of Christ wash away the sins of the world?*
- *Why did God require a sacrifice anyway?*

All of this began to trouble me. On some occasions I asked the priests about it. One of them wanted to know who had been putting all these ideas into my head. I replied that no one had; I had just been thinking about them myself. He seemed to think this was impossible. Someone had to be putting the ideas there. He continued to interrogate me for the identity of the evil purveyor of the ideas. I left wondering if he had any ideas in his head that had not been put there by someone else. Clearly, intellectual struggle was a notion completely foreign to him. Other clergy were no more helpful.

The clergy didn't help their own cause in other ways either. This was the time of the split within the Labor Party and the formation of the Democratic Labor Party that was virtually a Catholic party. I can remember sitting in church one Sunday whilst a senior priest sternly lectured the congregation on the way they were to vote in the oncoming election. He didn't want them voting Labor. I was still a schoolboy and not of voting age and my parents were diehard Liberal voters but I nevertheless was annoyed at the arrogance of the priest and also disappointed that no one made any outright objection to what he had to say.

Well, the years progressed. I became a teacher and later a TAFE lecturer. I had two marriages and three children and the needs of work and family consumed most of my time and energy. I seldom discussed religion with others, but I continued to observe the behaviour of both the religious and non-religious people with whom I worked and associated. I saw little difference in moral standards, ethics between the two, but to the extent that there was a difference it seemed that the non-religious were more trustworthy in ordinary matters of truthfulness and common decency. Certainly there seemed to be

absolutely no foundation for the old furphy that religion is required to create a moral standard. It was obvious that moral standards are created by things other than church teachings.

In the last decade I became concerned about the state of affairs created by the unhealthy mix of religion with politics throughout the world especially in the Middle East and the USA. Religion has always been a method of exercising power over people. Like so many others I was lulled into complacency by the thought that the spread of science, law and intellectual ideas would eventually reduce religious ideology to a minimum. I believed that churches would probably change into institutions that would serve an important social function as centres of personal development, social engagement and assistance to the needy and that ideology would become less important. I knew enough about the Catholic Church to know it would fight this progress to the last, but I expected that generally people would abandon the extreme aspects of its ideology by only paying lip service to it. I thought the Islamic religion would be even more difficult, but I nevertheless expected that it too would experience a longer and more gradual decline. I regarded the evangelical religions emanating from the USA as foolishness that would gradually give way to education, law and civilisation generally. As for people who actually believed in the literal bible and in creationism, I thought they were a harmless and laughable minority.

**RELIGION HAS NOT BEEN THE SOLE CAUSE OF THE POVERTY AND VIOLENCE BUT IT HAS BEEN A MAJOR CONTRIBUTOR.**

How wrong I was about all of them. Now we all face threats to world peace, scientific progress and civilisation generally. Whilst we in this country and in most parts of the Western world still enjoy security and the benefits of progress we see the horrors that have overtaken much of the third world. Religion has not been the sole cause of the poverty and violence but it has been a major contributor. Some of us are shocked to discover that there are so many people who take so seriously the notion of a fantasy life beyond this one that they devalue the real life we actually have. They are willing to inflict misery on others and sometimes even on themselves on the false hope of something better after they die despite the complete lack of any credible evidence of any such thing.

It was this that spurred me to join with others who shared my concerns. Other Humanists value the same things as myself: a desire to live a moral and decent life, to look after our families, to help others, to be good citizens and whilst doing all this to enjoy the pleasures offered by the natural world around us, by scientific advance and by philosophical and intellectual progress. I hope that at least some of those who read this and find some agreement with the views expressed here will be stimulated to join with us and help to avert the threats we and our children face and to live a full and happy life here on this earth of ours.

Source Adelaide Voices March-May 2008

In the last month we have witnessed some important events in Gaza. Putting them into perspective and appreciating their significance is not something that mainstream Western media has readily undertaken.

Let us firstly remind ourselves of what Gaza is. It is of course a small piece of land (360 square kilometres) in southern Palestine on the edge of the Sinai desert bordering Egypt. With a population of 1.4 million it is the most populated piece of land on earth.

Historically Gaza City has always been a Palestinian centre. It was built by the Philistines (from whom the name of Palestine derives) in biblical times and was the site of Dagon's temple, allegedly destroyed by Samson.

Under the UN Partition Plan the Gaza district was a part of the Arab state but during the 1948 war much of the province was captured by the Israelis. Gaza City, however, together with some surrounding lands was occupied by Egypt and became known as the Gaza Strip.

It was taken by Israel in 1967 along with the Sinai. When Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, Gaza remained under Israeli occupation and has thereafter been regarded by the world community as part of a future Palestinian state. I shall return to that peace treaty with Egypt.

Before the 1967 war few Israelis coveted Gaza since it lacked the religious significance, economic potential, or the strategic value of the West Bank. From the 1967 war however Israel encouraged Arabs to leave Gaza and go to the East Bank (Jordan).

The Allon Plan (1967) envisaged the ultimate annexation of most of the Gaza Strip. The failure to de-populate the area of Arabs prevented such annexation, as Israel struggled with the demographic problem of an Arab population having a higher birth rate than Jewish citizens. Those concerns led to the evacuation of Gaza by Israel in August 2005.

In early 2006 elections were held in the Occupied Territories. These elections had been promoted by the US. An unexpected result occurred: Hamas, an Islamic party, was elected. The West moved quickly to shut down the result. In Gaza itself measures were taken by Israel to isolate the inhabitants and bring them to heel.

Those measures centred around cutting off contact – economic, social, and political – with the outside world. Israel had little difficulty in achieving this result in so far as Gaza borders the Mediterranean, and Israel itself. In the very south of the Strip, however, the border was with Egypt. Would Egypt cooperate in the moves to strangle the people of Gaza, and if so, why?

It is necessary to take a deeper look at Egypt. It is a state struggling with its own identity. It is of course an Arab state with historical commitments to its Arab brothers in Palestine. After all, it fought at least four wars with Israel on its and their behalf - 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973.

It would be generally accepted that the majority of its people identify with the Palestinians' plight. On the other hand, it is the recipient of substantial American largesse. It is the number two recipient (to Israel) of American foreign aid.

It receives that economic aid only because it toes the line in its policies to Israel. The Egyptian government, led by Hosni Mubarak, is anxious to preserve it.

That is one side of the equation. The other is that Egypt is where Islamic fundamentalism was born. The Muslim Brotherhood, the pan-Islamist movement founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna, has largely been the informal opposition to successive Egyptian governments ever since.

Throughout its history it has been a conservative, and not a liberalising Islamic movement. In its early years it advanced Arab nationalism at a time when Great Britain retained powers that confined Egyptian sovereignty. It is noteworthy that at this same time Great Britain held a mandate over Palestine.

Between 1948 and 1967, prior to the rise of the PLO, it was the dominant political force in the Palestinian rump following the creation of the state of Israel: Egypt at that time controlled Gaza. In later years the Brotherhood gained a deserved reputation for concern over the people's welfare, particularly the poorest sections of society.

Since the early '90s the Brotherhood has been an illegal political party in Egypt. Nevertheless, its grassroots organisation is superior to secular opposition parties.

There can be no doubt, despite mixed messages, that the bulk of the Egyptian people have strong pro-Palestinian feelings. On the eve of 11th September 2001, 79% of the Egyptian public regarded Palestine as 'the single most important issue to them personally'.

It is against this background that one wonders how Hosni Mubarak has kept the lid on those feelings. Three weeks ago he failed to do so. When Hamas broke out of Gaza through the Rafah crossing it is undeniable that the Egyptian people welcomed the opportunity to assist their brothers and sisters.

There are real doubts about whether the lid can be put back on, despite recent announcements. And should the Mubarak government fall and a government more closely aligned to popular feeling come into place the possibility of Egypt questioning Israel's compliance with the 1978 Camp David Accords must arise.

As part of the Egyptian-Israeli agreement, Israel reconfirmed a specific commitment to honour the UN Resolutions 242 and 338 that prohibit acquisition of land by force and call for Israel's withdrawal from occupied territories. Israel clearly has not complied with that commitment.

Much is at stake. There can be no doubt that Hamas has made great strides in advancing the position of its people and had an impressive victory in breaking the Israeli siege. Its capacity to resist the occupation can only be enhanced.

Many would say that a strong case exists for Israel to grab the chance offered by George W. Bush in his last year of office to secure an accommodation with its neighbours. A failure to do so may come in time to be seen as a missed opportunity - a case of Israel being guilty of that of which it accuses the Palestinians - never missing an opportunity to miss an opportunity.

# Out of the Flames:

## The Importance of Michael Servetus for Today's Unitarians

Melbourne Unitarian Peace Memorial Church, 2 March 2008, by **Gretchen Thomas**



It is an honour to be asked to speak here today. I acknowledge and thank the original owners of the land on which we have gathered.

Michael Servetus was one of the early Reformation's many passionate, unorthodox theologians. Because he was so persuasive in defending early Unitarian and Universalist beliefs, Servetus is widely known, even revered, by modern Unitarians. He was an unusual person living in an unusual time. This is an opportunity to learn about those exciting times and about his remarkable life story.

Michael Servetus was born in Villanueva, Spain, in 1511, and died in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1553. Some historians say he was a priest, others say he was not. Perhaps, like Erasmus, he was a non-ordained church clerk. He definitely was a child prodigy who became a person of enormous versatility with expertise in many areas. During his 42 years, he was an author, editor, and professor. He was a geographer, mathematician, astronomer, and astrologer. He was also a pharmacist and legal expert. As well, he was

a linguist, translator, theologian, biblical scholar, and a condemned heretic. Servetus' belief in himself, his brilliance and extremism, his arrogance and obstinacy, were his strengths, and his weaknesses. They cost him his life, but they also created a lasting legacy – a legacy we modern Unitarians have inherited.

Servetus' entire life was lived on the cusp of change. The 16th century was a crossroads where the feudalism of medieval society, the humanism of the Renaissance, the reason of science, the backlash against the Inquisition, and rumours of riches among savages in the recently discovered 'New World,' all met, clashed, and caused tremendous political and religious upheaval. During Servetus' lifetime, the hold of the Church broke open. Up to then, the Church had controlled governments, people's fortunes, their hearts and minds. But now, the question of what could replace the Church's authority was up for grabs.

Servetus was one of the scholars and theologians who leapt headlong into this opening, an opening though which the Protestant Reformation was emerging. Able students like Servetus could learn the previously forbidden languages of Hebrew and Aramaic, and study for themselves the original versions of the Bible, discovering how it had been translated, and uncovering how it had been changed. Servetus was

an advocate of the highly controversial practice of autopsy, a new practice that held the power to move medicine from a mystery to a science. Servetus worked as an assistant to court physicians and theologians in a time when doctors and priests were preoccupied with questions about theology and the role of the Church that were as much political and scientific as they were theological.

Servetus was also a central player in a publishing explosion. One hundred years after Gutenberg invented the printing press, publishing had become the engine of the Reformation with a continent-wide market, and beyond. With a publisher's help, an author could capture the attention of the reading world. Printer-publishers were the venture capitalists and the media moguls of the 16th century, making huge fortunes from the books produced by their new technology. They regularly hired Servetus, because he was an eminent scholar and an excellent editor. They helped him publish his own controversial writing. After Servetus was condemned by the Spanish Inquisition his writings were printed secretly and anonymously.

Large numbers of books and their wide distribution meant it was no longer possible to censor printed matter that was controversial, radical, revolutionary, or heretical. The power of the Inquisition had lessened, but there were still political and financial gains to be achieved by accusing heretics. Writing books, and suppressing books, took place within this incendiary environment.



I am convinced that our interest in Michael Servetus has revived because his voice speaks so well for our own times – these times, when discovery and manufacture of an information technology has led to an information explosion that in turn has led to far more families travelling to foreign countries and making sure their children learn several languages. The printing press was to the 16th century what the personal computer is today. We, too, see a breaking up and re-formation of our older organisations and long-held borders. Power is shifting from its traditional holders to new information-brokering oligarchies. Our religious and ethnic wars are followed by trials in which individuals and nations are held to new international standards. We, too, have waked up to the urgent need for inter-faith dialogue. The world feels smaller, and its people are learning to think globally.

In 2003 most of our Unitarian congregations held services to mark the 450th anniversary of Servetus' death. Fifty years before, on the 400th anniversary, very few such services were held. But then, 50 years ago there was no Internet.

While he was growing up in Spain, Servetus lived alongside Jewish and Islamic minority groups that were desperately fighting battles for religious and ethnic freedom. He hoped for a return to the early 14th century period in Spain known as *Convivencia*, when Jews, Christians, and Muslims coexisted in relative peace. He began to defend

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the rights of outcasts long before he realised that he would become one himself.

The only Church Servetus knew was the highly corrupt 16th century Catholic Church. He was disgusted by the decadent opulent lives of most church leaders. Like Luther, he was deeply shocked by the Pope Leo X's selling expensive indulgences to finance his empire, indulgences that were guaranteed by the Pope to completely remit one's every sin, past and future. As an 18-year-old scholar's assistant and minor member of the court, Servetus attended the coronation of Charles the 5th (the last Holy Roman Emperor) and was horrified to find that Pope Clement the 7th was worshipped as a divine being.

It was a turning point in Servetus' life to see first-hand the corrupt Church's flagrant display of wealth and power. He felt compelled to speak out, and at age 19 wrote his first book *On the Errors of the Trinity*. The most influential books then flooding Europe were by young, outspoken authors addressing the pressing issues of the day. Servetus thought his book proved convincingly that the doctrine of the Trinity was not the word of God, but purely the creation of the Council of Nicaea. He hoped his writing would successfully undermine the entire rotten structure on which the power of Rome rested. But he could not have been more wrong. His writing infuriated the Catholic Church as well as all of the more orthodox Protestant Reformers. It caused Servetus to

be condemned to death (in absentia) by the Spanish Inquisition.

Servetus escaped the Inquisition's clutches, moved to France, changed his name, and trained in Paris for a new profession – doctor of medicine. For many years noblemen travelled great distances to consult with the learned 'Dr Villanueva.' But Servetus had not given up on trying to reform the Christian churches of his time. In his early thirties, he rewrote his book as *The Restoration of Christianity*. He believed Christianity had been 'stolen by the Church' and should be 'restored' to the purity of the 4th century Christian communities, as they existed before the Council of Nicaea.

In addition to its liberal, provocative theological assertions, *The Restoration of Christianity* contained the first accurate account of pulmonary circulation, but because Calvin ordered all copies of Servetus's book burned, it was another 140 years before anyone paid attention to Servetus' Nobel Prize-worthy discovery. What his objectors *did* pay attention to was that Servetus was putting forward highly heretical ideas – ideas that conflicted strikingly with the positions of the more orthodox Reformers like Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, ideas that would soon provide the foundation of the beliefs of Humanists in the Netherlands and Italy, and of Unitarians in Poland and Transylvania.

Five years before his last book was printed, Servetus sent

parts of the manuscript to Calvin, inviting an ongoing debate on their merits. Servetus argued that God was the original source and ultimate creator of all things, intangible, transcendent, and present everywhere

as a positive force. Calvin's God was vengeful and punishing, concerned with judgement, sin, and the afterlives of the chosen, and the damned. Servetus maintained the Unitarian views that the Trinity was not affirmed anywhere in the *original* text of the Bible and that Jesus was born a human being and his human nature prevented him from being a divine part of God. Calvin's Jesus was definitely divine. Servetus also took the *Universalist* position that *all* human beings had the Holy Spirit dwelling within them, which meant every human being had worth and dignity. For Calvin, one joined with God only after death, and only if you were one of the fortunate who had been chosen (pre-destined before birth by God) for the ascent to heaven. Servetus argued that baptism should take place only after one had become an adult, because one must be an adult thinker to be capable of making a genuine commitment to being a Christian. (This has always been the Transylvanian Unitarians' practice.) Calvin, on the other hand, was pleased to have parents decide for their infants that they would be Calvinist Christians. For Calvin, the world was wicked, and the wicked required discipline and punishment. Servetus rejected the hopelessness of Calvin's view, that implied forgiveness and reform were not possible. In fact, it was Servetus' *Universalist* denial of a punishing God that most infuriated Calvin and convinced him Servetus must be judged a heretic and condemned to death.

At the trial, 38 charges were brought, including what was in some ways the most insignificant one, 'insulting Calvin.' It is important to note that Calvin needed the widely publicised trial to prop up his shaky position as the political and religious dictator of the city-state of Geneva, and he was infuriated, as the trial dragged on and Servetus continually out-argued the prosecutors and judges.

History has shown that it was not protests made in defence of his writings that have made Servetus important, but rather the protests of his unjust death so that today, most people know Servetus more for his death at the hands of Calvin than for the progressive theology and scientific reason he believed were important enough to die for.

It was Calvin's intention to eradicate Servetus' ideas along with the man. He almost succeeded. Although the punishment for owning a copy of this highly forbidden book was *death*, three copies survived. Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone's - book *Out of the Flames* traces the fascinating histories of each of these three books. One of them saved the Transylvanian Unitarians from extinction during the Counter-Reformation. In 1784, just before the French Revolution, the Bibliothèque Royale purchased one of the other surviving copies for 4,120 livres. At the same auction Calvin's small book, *Defense of the True Faith of the Sacred Trinity against the Hideous Errors of Michael Servetus*, Spaniard, was bought for 19 livres.

450 years later we find ourselves in step with Servetus's solutions for the ills of *his* times. To counteract corruption, Servetus argued for placing less authority in the hands of the Church and the Pope. To counteract the falsification of history, Servetus argued for freedom of speech and the press. He defended empirical science based on direct observation and actual experience. He contended that, 'We must not impose as truths, concepts over which there are doubts.' He believed that well-reasoned argument and debate should decide political and religious concerns. Like the Unitarians in Poland and Transylvania – who soon followed and extended the paths Servetus originally laid down – he located moral responsibility within each individual.

All of these positions assume relying on one's own reason and conscience for authority, rather than depending upon a priest or Pope to decide for you how you should live, or what you must believe. This respect of individual moral responsibility and conscience was a threat to every established religious institution of his era – whether Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or Islamic. Freedom of

religion, freedom of speech, and tolerance of religious and ethnic diversities were the swords Servetus carried into the battles of the Reformation.

In his history of the development of Unitarian thought (*For Faith and Freedom*), Charles Howe asserts that Servetus' writings and martyrdom have given today's Unitarians a double legacy. First, the widespread protests against Servetus' trial and execution that grew into a passionate protest movement led to greater religious tolerance in the 16th century and sparked the focus on tolerance that has always stood at the heart of Unitarianism. Second, these protests also strengthened the more liberal side of all the emerging Protestant groups. Howe maintains that Servetus' writings and death 'provided the crucial catalyst that initiated the Unitarian movements in Poland and Transylvania,' with their commitment to the authority of personal reason, freedom of religious choice, freedom of speech, and tolerance of neighbouring faiths.

Servetus' trial and death were certainly a testament to courage of conscience. It became the moment in European history when other champions of justice, religious freedom, and tolerance drew a line and said, 'It is wrong to silence such courage of conviction. I will not support it.' The spread of Servetus' ideas marked a turning point in the intellectual discussions that eventually led to the recognition of freedom of thought and conscience as an inalienable human right. And though in the beginning the Reformers had no intention of being tolerant of other religions, in the end the states and churches of a divided Europe found that they must tolerate one another or die.

I want to mention as a sidebar, Katherine Vogel, who was also burned at the stake for 'refusing to recant his disbelief in the Trinity.' But all this happened before the printing press, so we know very little about her. What allowed Servetus to be known to us – what has saved him for our times – were the three copies of *The Restoration of Christianity* that survived and became surrogates for their author, going into hiding and relying on secret protection until, centuries later, they could be safely read, appreciated, and acted upon. His writing kept alive Servetus' spirit and his genius, so others (including Faustus Socinus, Francis Dávid, Voltaire, Thomas Jefferson, Joseph Priestley, John Locke, Unitarian leaders across the world, and many others) might draw inspiration from Servetus' unsparing quest for truth. Four hundred and fifty-five years later, we are all richer for it.

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