

SERVETUS

Our 16th Century Contemporary

A brief introduction to the life and teachings of
Michael Servetus, a pioneer of religious freedom.

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Foreward

Servetus : Our 16th Century Contemporary

Rev. Peter Morales, President
Unitarian Universalist Association

At first glance, nothing could seem more esoteric and removed from our lives than a re-examination of the writings of a theologian born 500 years ago. The disputes which occupied Servetus and his contemporaries are not matters we debate today. The arguments strike us as tedious.

On closer examination, the religious controversy that cost Servetus his life is all too modern. The particular points of doctrine may not concern us today. However, the central problems of religious authority, religious freedom and the search for common understanding across different religious traditions are very much with us today. And, sadly, conflict fuelled by religious differences kills people every day.

Servetus dared to use reason and evidence to counter religious hierarchy and authority. He was willing to call for tolerance and humility in religious debate. He was courageous enough to look outside the scriptures of his own faith tradition. He sought to cross cultural borders.

The essays in this book open new perspectives on this often enigmatic man. They let us see that his struggles are our struggles. Michael Servetus may have been born 500 years ago, but the issues he faced are our issues. To know Servetus is to know ourselves.

Prólogo

Serveto : Nuestro Contemporáneo del Siglo XVI

Rvdo. Peter Morales, Presidente
de la Asociación Unitaria Universalista

A primera vista, nada nos parece mas esotérico y ajeno a nuestras vidas que volver a examinar un teólogo nacido hace 500 años. Las controversias que ocuparon a Serveto y a sus contemporáneos no son asuntos que discutimos hoy día. Las líneas de razonamiento nos aparecen tediosas.

Pero cuando examinamos el asunto con mas atención, vemos que la controversia que le costó la vida a Serveto es bastante moderna. Los puntos de doctrina no nos importan hoy. Sin embargo, los problemas de la autoridad religiosa, la libertad religiosa y la búsqueda de unas bases de entendimiento y comunicación a través de distintas tradiciones religiosas están con nosotros de una manera profunda. Desafortunadamente, los conflictos religiosos matan a gente cada día.

Serveto se atrevió a usar la razón y la evidencia para oponerse a la jerarquía y autoridad religiosas. Pidió tolerancia y humildad en las disputas religiosas. Tuvo el coraje de buscar fuera de las escrituras de su propia fe. Trató de cruzar fronteras culturales.

Los ensayos en este libro nos dan perspectivas nuevas de este hombre enigmático. Debemos darnos cuenta de que sus conflictos son nuestros. Aunque Serveto nació hace 500 años, las cuestiones a las que se enfrentó son como las nuestras. Conocer a Serveto es conocerse a sí mismo.

Servetus Biography: Competing in the Spirit of Prophecy



The birthplace of Servetus

Jaume de Marcos

(Speech delivered at the IARF Servetus Day event, Unitarian Chapel of Rosslyn Hill, Hampstead, London, January 15, 2011)

Servetus was born in Villanueva de Sigena, in the Kingdom of Aragon, on 29th of September, 1511. We are not sure about the exact date, no baptismal records have been preserved. There are two different moments that he acknowledged that he was born in 1511, but once he said that his birth date was 1509.

His father was the notary at the nearby Royal Monastery of Sigena, he was an *infanzón*, a member of the lesser nobility in the countryside. That means that he was a “pure blood” Christian, with no Jewish or Muslim members in his family, because only men who had only Christian ancestors could aspire to the title of *infanzón*, which was first given to his ancestor in the 14th century. However, Servetus's mother descended, from the maternal line, from a rich family of *conversos*, former Jews who had abjured their faith to become Christians probably in order to gain social recognition. This conversion took place before the forced conversions of 1492. However it is unlikely that this connection with a formerly Jewish family could justify young Servetus's view about the Trinity. Any suspicion that the Servetus family could be guilty of “judaizing” (i.e. to secretly teach or practice the Jewish faith) would have meant a complete disgrace for the whole family and their descendants, and probably death or exile and the loss of all their possessions.

Being a man of relative wealth also allowed him to give his son a better education, first probably in Barcelona, and then at the University of Toulouse in France, where young Servetus studied Law. He would never go back to his homeland.

In Toulouse, young Michael showed his first signs of religious rebellion when he was involved with a group of students who sympathized with the Lutheran Reformation. To avoid further problems, he left Toulouse to become the personal assistant of his former teacher, Juan de Quintana, who had become the confessor of Emperor Charles V. This allowed Servetus to travel around Europe, and he was present at the ceremony of Charles' coronation in Bologna, Italy, in 1530. The exhibition of power and luxury that displayed the Pope's entourage profoundly disturbed the young and idealistic Servetus, who left the royal court and wandered around Central Europe, probably looking for his admired Erasmus of Rotterdam. He finally decided to stay in Basel, where he met a famous Reformer, Ecolampadius. Apparently Servetus had already decided that Christianity had a problem called the Trinity, and he managed to infuriate Ecolampadius with his constant arguments on this topic.

In 1531, his first book, the book that made Servetus infamous around Europe, and that is still his best known work among Unitarians, was published. It is called *De Trinitatis Erroribus* in Latin, which can be translated as “On the Errors about the Trinity”. In this short book, with a passionate style and an amazingly rich array of quotes from the Bible and the Early Church Fathers (which was even more astonishing if we remember that Servetus was 20 years old at that time), he managed to discredit the most fundamental and complex dogmas of the Christian Church: the Trinity.

Let me read a few lines for you from this book, so that you can understand why it was, and in some ways still is, a big scandal, like a sudden, unexpected explosion:

“To such a degree this tradition of the Trinity was the laughing-stock for the Muslims, only God knows. The Jews also recoil in horror from any adherence to this fantasy of ours and they laugh at our stupidity about the Trinity, and because of this kind of blasphemies, they do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah promised by the Law. And not Jews and Muslims, but even the beasts from the countryside would mock us, if they could understand our fantastic opinion, because the whole creation bless the one and only God.”(DTE, Book 1)

Alarmed by the outrage that his book created among both Protestants and Catholics alike, young Servetus published a second book, intending to clarify the issues that he felt that had been misunderstood. This second book, called *Dialogues on the Trinity*, arose even more protests and condemnations, to the point that Servetus decided to discreetly disappear from the public focus. Instead, a false persona, a man from the old kingdom of Navarre called “Michel de Villeneuve”, appeared in Paris some time later. There he almost met young Calvin, who was still an obscure student of theology, but although they had arranged a meeting, Servetus never showed up. They would meet many years later under darker circumstances.

In France, Michel de Villeneuve managed to make a living, first as an editor, and then, after some time studying Medicine in Paris, as a physician in the small city of Vienne. There he made a friendship, of all people, with the local bishop. This fact would save his life some years later.

But the religious rebel was still alive under the good manners and irreproachable behavior of M. de Villeneuve, the physician, who had already found out how the pulmonary circulation works in the body. But Servetus the theologian could understand what this renewal of the blood actually meant: it was the breath of God giving new life to the human soul through the blood. This discovery would be included in his last book, the book that caused his death, the *Restitution of Christianity* (*Christianismi Restitutio*, 1553).

Servetus had been secretly writing this book for years. He had even managed to send a copy to John Calvin, who had become the religious leader of the city of Geneva and had established a sort of theocracy. Their disputation 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.

But Servetus went to Geneva. He decided to publish his book anonymously in 1553, but was discovered by the French inquisition and interrogated. However, his friendship with the bishop paid off, and he managed to escape one night from prison... too easily. Servetus went to Calvin's city, perhaps on his way to Italy, or perhaps to have a final conversation with the reformer. Actually, the conversation became a heresy trial. You probably know the rest of the story, Servetus was tried for heresy and burned at the stake in Geneva on the 27th of October, 1553.

How is Servetus remembered

Servetus is better known among Unitarians for being the first reformer in modern times to question the Trinity.

However, some Unitarian and UU scholars have suggested that Servetus may have been the first to denounce the doctrine of the Trinity, but now that Unitarians give more importance to religious tolerance and the free and responsible search for meaning, Servetus should no longer be considered an important figure in the history of Unitarianism.

For example, the American UU scholar David Bumbaugh, in his *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 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."

Likewise, other religious liberals tend to see Servetus as a hard-headed and intolerant man who could only see his own truth and dismissed any other views, like Calvin's, in angry tones. They think that Servetus is only interesting for Unitarians because he spoke against the Trinity, and for nothing else.

Sebastian Castellio is usually considered the first defender of freedom of conscience, when he wrote about Servetus's death at the stake:

“To kill a man is not to protect a doctrine, but it is to kill a man. When the Genevans killed Servetus, they did not defend a doctrine, they killed a man. To protect a doctrine is not the magistrate's affair (what has the sword to do with doctrine?)”

However, Servetus had already asked for tolerance before Castellio did.

In his good-bye letter to Ecolampadius, he wrote: “I asked you to teach me, and you have condemned me. There is a sickness in the human condition that we believe that others are impious and liars, but not ourselves, because nobody acknowledges his own mistakes. You say that I do not care if everybody is a thief and nobody should be punished or executed for this. The Almighty God is my witness, that I do not share that opinion. If I have said anything about it, it is because I consider very serious to kill a man just because, in some issue about interpreting Scripture, he may be in error, when we know that even the greatest scholars fall in it.”

In an allegation during the Geneva trial, he stated that “in academic matters there should be no accusation, and that everybody should be allowed to defend his own cause in discussions.”

In an appeal to the Geneva court, he remembered the time of the Arian heresy, and that “when issues were resolved by the churches, those who did not obey and repent were exiled”.

In a question to Calvin (September 1553), he asked if “he did not know perfectly well that it is not a duty of a minister of the Gospel to become the criminal prosecutor, nor to prosecute a man to death.”

But most importantly, this is what he wrote at the end of his second book, *Dialogues on the Trinity* (1532), in a short addendum titled *De Iustitia Regni Christi* (On the Justice of Christ's Kingdom):

“I do not fully agree with these people, neither do I with those others, because they all seem to be partly right, and partly wrong. May God show us our own mistakes, and not be stubborn. It would be much easier to discern these questions if, in the church, everybody was allowed to speak their own minds, competing among themselves in the spirit of prophecy...”

Please note that “prophecy”, in this context, does not refer to the ability to foresee the future. It is used in the Biblical sense of the word. The “spirit of prophecy” means having a clear vision of how God wants things to be, how things should develop in the world, if truth and justice is to be achieved.

Servetus's text also means that truth is relative, that nobody can claim absolute certainty about religious things (including himself), because everybody, even the most remarkable scholars and leaders, may be mistaken. The only way to proceed is not by abiding to some inerrant authority or text, but by hearing different voices, all of them limited in their scope and conditions, but nevertheless inspired by the spirit to aim at a higher truth that can be reached when all of them are heard, "competing", i.e. complementing each other and striving to go further and further away... and closer to Truth.

Nobody has all the answers, rely on your own conscience enlightened by the spirit and aspiring to a clearer vision, hear different voices in religion, in a common search for truth and meaning... Does it sound liberal (Unitarian!) to you? It does to me.

And is this the stubborn, intolerant, hard-headed Servetus that has been depicted over and over again in history books for liberals? Think twice. Go back to the sources. Read and decide for yourselves.

Now we have the chance to recover, not just the living example of the man who was executed in Geneva for his stubbornness in defending his beliefs about the Trinity, but also his own words. We have been blessed in the last years with several new books and reprintings that deal with Servetus.

The Goldstone's *Out of the Flames* (despite its obvious sensationalism and historical inaccuracies)

The newly annotated reprinting of the classic biography of Servetus, *Hunted Heretic*, by Protestant scholar Ronald Bainton, thanks to the relentless efforts of the former president of the UUHS, Peter Hughes.

The first English language edition of *Restitution of Christianity*, by Marian Hillar and Alice Forsey.

And the complete edition of Servetus's original Latin texts, complete with their Spanish translations and notes, edited by New York-based Spanish scholar Angel Alcalá.

And finally, the untiring work of the Michael Servetus Institute in Spain to preserve his memory and legacy, and the restoration of the house where Servetus was born 500 years ago, which has become a museum and conference center.

Servetus and Islam : In his life



Peter Hughes
UU Historical Society

Servetus grew up in a Spain that had recently driven out its non-Christians. In 1492 the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella had conquered the Muslim Kingdom of Granada and enacted the expulsion of the Jews. With the Inquisition keeping a watchful eye for any lapses into Islam or Judaism amongst recent forced converts to Christianity, it was an unpromising era for interfaith dialogue. Yet the legacy persisted of earlier centuries in which the three faiths had coexisted—fruitfully, if not always peacefully—upon the Iberian Peninsula. Like other Spaniards, Servetus inherited this as a problem: how can a nation of Christians come to terms with a past in which many of the glories of their civilization were gifts of non-Christian culture?

Some chose to deny the value of the glories of Moorish Spain altogether. With the aid of the Inquisition, they hoped to suppress evidences of Muslim and Jewish faith. To these, the previous 800 years, which included the flowering of Islamic culture in Spain, was just part of the era of darkness, best forgotten, as Spain and Europe moved on, into the new age of exploration and reform. Aided by the recent Renaissance rediscovery of the Greek language and of ancient Greek literature, Christian scholars hoped to rebuild science, medicine, and philosophy upon direct acquaintance with Greeks such as Euclid, Galen, and Aristotle, rather than having these mediated through the translations, commentaries, and original treatises written in Arabic by the Islamic philosophers and scientists who had for so long been the principal stewards and preservers of Greek knowledge.

Others, like Servetus, could neither forget, deny, nor suppress the problem posed by the continued existence of the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For him, it remained a puzzle to be solved, not by denial, denunciation, or force, but by a form of integration. While many Christian apologists defended their faith by explaining what was wrong with others' religions, Servetus chose to explore what was amiss in Christianity by finding out why Muslims and Jews could not abide it and did not willingly convert. Although his investigative attitude did not approach the modern interfaith ideal of granting other religions, in principle, the same value as one's own, Servetus did suppose: 1) that Islam and Judaism had some value, and 2) that these religions had information to impart, useful to Christianity as a corrective to the wrong ideas and misinformation that had entered Christendom since the time of Jesus.

In Book 1 of *On the Errors of the Trinity* work Servetus lamented that “this tradition of the Trinity has given the Muslims much opportunity to make fun of us.”ⁱ “Not only the Muslims and Jews,” he went on, “but even the beasts of the field would laugh at us, if they could but understand our fantastic ideas. For all the works of the Lord bless the One God.” He also wrote:

Hear as well what Muhammad says, for more faith is to be put in one truth confessed by an enemy, than in a hundred of our lies. For he says in his Quran that Christ was the greatest of the prophets, the spirit of God, the power of God, the breath of God, the very soul of God, the Word born of a perpetual virgin by the breath of God . . . He says, moreover, that the Apostles and Evangelists and the first Christians were the best of men, and had written the truth, without believing in the Trinity or in three Persons in the Divine Being. Rather he said that men in later times introduced this.ⁱⁱ

While writing *Errors* Servetus most likely got his information from secondary sources, including perhaps *The Sifting of the Quran*, written in 1461 by a cardinal, Nicholas of Cusa. Servetus appears to have adopted the cautiously ecumenical method of Nicholas (who had also investigated the common faith underlying all religions) in that he treated the Quran with respect, finding in it some helpful germs of religious truth. Nicholas, though a friend of Pope Pius II, had to be careful in what he said about competing faiths. He measured Islam by a Christian yardstick and found it wanting, though worthy. Young Servetus felt much less restraint. He looked at Christianity as he imagined Muslims must see it, and found in the Quran a useful corrective to some of the errors that had accumulated in Christian tradition.

In 1537, while a student of medicine, Servetus wrote a small book, *On Syrups*. In it he addressed a subject of much concern to medical practitioners of his era: which version of medicine should be most trusted, the one mediaeval Europe had been taught by Arabic science, or the one European humanists, newly educated in Greek, could now read for themselves?

Both versions of medicine were founded on the writings of the ancient Greek physicians. During the Renaissance, when they began to read Greek for themselves, many European physicians came to believe that they could get better and purer information by going directly to the Greek sources than by reading translations from Arabic of Greek treatises. On the other hand, to reject Arabic medicine, as many Reformation-era European physicians recommended doing, meant discarding the added information, insight, and emerging scientific methodology developed during hundreds of years of Arabic medical practice. Accordingly, there were two parties at that time in European medicine: the Hellenists and the Arabists.

On this point, Servetus claimed to side with the Hellenists. He criticized the Arabs' theories on digestion and disease. On the other hand, he put forward, as the main theme of his work, that "Syrups, or sweet, prepared potions, not only because of their power of concocting, but because of several other uses, ought to be defended as very useful."ⁱⁱⁱ Syrup, as a useful form of administering medication, was an Arab invention and the word "syrup" is of Arabic derivation, as Servetus admitted.^{iv} His advocacy of Greek theory did not drive him to entirely discard Arabic practice. He adopted a mediating stance: "From what I am able to judge in this controversial question, neither side understands the matter thoroughly," he wrote in Syrups. "I shall not deny to anyone these things which I have freely received, nor shall I through fear hold back what may be of assistance to mortals." ^v

From his later theological writing, it is clear that Servetus was conversant with works of mediaeval philosophers who were, in turn, immersed in Arabic philosophy. He mentioned, and criticized, a major Islamic philosopher, Averroes (Ibn Rushd), in *The Restoration of Christianity*.^{vi} More importantly, he discussed the Quran in *Restoration* at much greater length than he had done in *Errors*. He no longer had to rely on secondary works for his information, for in 1543 Theodore Bibliander published a Latin translation of the Quran as part of a three-volume encyclopedia of Christian knowledge about Islam.^{vii}

Servetus used the Bibliander edition as the principal source for his comments about the Quran in the *Restoration*. Here is some of what Servetus wrote:

Muhammad also says that the first disciples of Christ were the best and noblest of men, who had written the truth without accepting in the Trinity. This was introduced by men in later times, who were corrupters of sacred doctrine. In sura 4 he says that countless disagreements later arose over matters about which "there was no quarrel or debate" [among Christians in the earliest times].^{viii} He reaffirms these views in sura 20, saying that the Christian people, originally united, were later divided by various controversies because they turned to many gods.^{ix}

He says that Christ, having been elevated above all things, was awarded the power and the mind of God himself.^x In sura 5 he says that Christ "entered the world endowed with divine power and strength,"^{xi} "to be the face of all nations in this age and in the future."^{xii} In sura 11 he says that all people of the book, the Jews as well as the Saracens, will finally come to believe in this Jesus, the son of Mary. In the same sura he says, "Believe, therefore, in God and his messenger, and do not talk of three gods."^{xiii} In sura 12 he says that Christ "brought us the gospel, which is the light, the confirmation of the Law, a chastening, and the correct way."^{xiv} In sura 13 he says that Christ had "a pure and blessed soul" and that he had prepared a heavenly table for those who believe in him.^{xv}

In the end, despite granting almost everything to Christ, he does not acknowledge Christ as the son of God, as the word “son” was used by the tritheists in his time. On the contrary, he was deeply offended by these three incorporeal gods—or three distinct invisible and equal beings in one God. Because of these perverse Trinitarian teachings, he turned his back on Christianity, which, for the world, was a very sad and lamentable thing. . . . When Muhammad denied the Son of God, he was denying the idea, which was then being bandied about, of an invisible son, resembling the Father—as can be gathered from suras 100 and 122.^{xvi} Otherwise, having already conceded that the man Jesus Christ was conceived by God in a virgin, he would have willingly acknowledged him to be the Son of God.^{xvii}

It is clear that Servetus, misled by the loose Latin translation, misunderstood what the Quran says about Jesus. The passage from which Servetus got the idea that Christ was “awarded the power and mind of God himself” is rendered in a modern English translation of the Quran as “We gave Jesus, son of Mary, our clear signs and strengthened him with the holy spirit.” The description of Jesus as “the face of all nations in this age and in the future,” taken from the Latin version, is rendered in the same modern translation as “held in honour in this world and the next.”^{xviii}

Servetus also greatly overestimated the potential appeal to Muslims of his revised version of Christianity. It is true that in *Errors and in Restoration* Servetus rejected the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. That in itself might have been applauded by a Muslim or Jewish audience. But he replaced it with what appears to to be an unorthodox Trinity of his own devising. And he clearly thought that the man Jesus was God himself. Had he been given the opportunity to preach his gospel to a Muslim population, he would quickly have learned how much in error were his basic “ecumenical” assumptions. Servetus occupied much better ground when he argued, to a Christian audience, and especially to the Protestant reformers, that the Quran’s critique of their Trinitarian doctrine made it difficult for them to sustain the claim that they were, strictly speaking, monotheists.

When Servetus was imprisoned and on trial in Geneva, he was interrogated about his comments about the Quran. He had to defend his text carefully, to protect himself from the charge of apostasy, that is, advocating Islam over Christianity. He was asked “If he did not know that his doctrine was pernicious, seeing that it favors the Jews and Turks by excusing them? And if he had not studied the Quran to impugn and dispute the doctrine and religion held by the Christian churches?”^{xix} He replied “that he didn’t think his doctrine pernicious, nor favorable to Jews and Turks. As to the Quran, he saw that it was published in Basel, that it was permissible to read it, and

that there were letters from ministers of the Zurich church printed with it. He did not read the Quran with any intention to harm the Christian faith, but rather to aid it.”^{xx}

The prosecutor then asked “Is not the Quran an evil book full of blasphemies?” Servetus conceded that it was.^{xxi} The interrogator followed up on this admission: “As you well knew the Quran to be an evil book full of blasphemies, why did you cite passages from it to support your doctrine and excuse the Turks?” Servetus replied, “I cited it as claiming the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, because the Quran shows that most plainly and makes Christ greater than Muhammad. I would not aid [Muhammad] any more than I would the devil.”^{xxii} The prosecutor pressed him, “Do you not know that you cannot base a proper apologetic upon an evil book and an author of bad doctrine?” Servetus answered, “From an evil book, one can well take good things.”^{xxiii}

Given Servetus’s interest in Islamic and Jewish thought, and his use of non-Christian scriptures and commentaries to critique Christianity, it may be that, in his writings and in his story, there is a legacy for the multi-faith modern world—a world in which the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic societies, and communities of many more faiths besides, connected by speedy transportation and communications, dwell in each others’ presence and are both enriched and frightened by each other’s strangeness. Perhaps we, like Servetus, can study the scriptures of others in order to understand our own faith and tradition better. And perhaps, having studied other faiths, we can envision some interfaith superstructure that will permit us all to dwell together in harmony and mutual respect without loss of cultural individuality.

ⁱ Servetus, *De Trinitatis erroribus*, 42b.

ⁱⁱ Servetus, *De Trinitatis erroribus*, 43a.

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Donald O’Malley, *Michael Servetus: A Translation of His Geographical, Medical and Astrological Writings* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1953), 61.

^{iv} O’Malley, 140.

^v O’Malley, 61.

^{vi} Servetus, *Christianismi Restitutio*, 160-161.

^{vii} *Machumetis Saracenorum principis eiusque successorum vitae, ac doctrina, ipseque Alcoran* (The Lives of Muhammad, the Chief of the Saracens, and of His Successors, Their Teachings, and the Quran Itself). The translation of the Quran had been made in Spain in 1143 by Robert of Ketton under the supervision of the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable.

^{viii} Quran 2:253. The surah divisions and surah numbers in the Latin Quran that Servetus consulted were different than those in a standard Quran.

^{ix} Quran 10:18-19.

^x Quran 2:253.

^{xi} Quran 3:50.

^{xii} Quran 3:45.

^{xiii} Quran 4:159, 4:171.

^{xiv} Quran 5:46.

^{xv} Quran 5:110-115.

^{xvi} Quran 90:1-3, 112:3-4.

^{xvii} Servetus, *Christianismi Restitutio*, 35-36.

^{xviii} *The Qur’an*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

^{xix} *Calvini Opera* 8:765.21.

^{xx} *Calvini Opera*, 8:770.21.

^{xxi} *Calvini Opera*, 8:765.22 and 8:770.22.

^{xxii} *Calvini Opera*, 8:777.34 and 8:782.34.

^{xxiii} *Calvini Opera*, 8:778.35 and 8:782.35.

Servetus and Islam : In his writings



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(author's translation of his 2010 Lecture given in Spanish)

This paper deals with the approach that famous Spanish humanist and heretic, Michael Servetus (1511-1553), took of Islam and how he used Quranic quotes and claims, with varying degrees of accuracy and understanding, in his own argumentation against the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Unlike other authors from the Renaissance period, Servetus did not consider Islam as an evil in itself or as a dangerous belief that had to be condemned, but on the contrary, he thought that some aspects of the original intuitions of Christianity had been somehow preserved in its teachings. Rather than helping him, this could only put him even more at odds with the religious authorities of the period.

The figure of Miguel Serveto Conesa (Villanueva de Sijena 1511? - Geneva 1553) has always attracted controversy and concern. The most traditional Spanish Catholics, such as 19th-century scholar Menéndez Pelayo, grudgingly admired him as a Spanish scholar killed by the Calvinist heresy, but they were bothered by his unorthodox religious views. Freethinkers claimed him as a physician and scientist who was sacrificed by religious intolerance, but they never understood why Servetus included his remarkable description of the minor blood circulation, which has achieved worldwide renown, in a book of theology, not physiology. Therefore, all were uncomfortable with a figure who did not meet their own expectations, and for many years Servetian studies were limited to biographical narratives. The lack of translations from the original Latin of many of his works, and particularly his *magnum opus*, the *Christianismi Restitutio* (1553), helped put the focus on the person and ignore his work.

Today we can no longer settle for the study of life, travels and adventures of the man. It is imperative to advance the study of his work and put it in the turbulent context in which it was forged: 16th-century Western Europe, which had just been cracked in its religious unity by the Reformation. For Spanish-speaking scholars, the recent publication of the *Complete Works*, launched by the Diputación General de

Aragón under the supervision of Dr. Angel Alcalá, has been a true landmark for further research and study of Servetus' theology and his other works in the fields of medicine, astronomy, geography, etc. Having the full text of Servetus' works available is also a pleasure for the reader and the scholar, a great privilege that was reserved for only a few over several centuries, as many of his books had been burned.

But it is nevertheless hard to understand why a man of such intelligence, and well versed in theological matters such as Melanchthon, Luther's assistant and successor at the helm of the German Reformation, said in 1556 that the "Servetian, i.e., Mohammedan teachings" were being spread in Poland (Baron 1989, p. 435).¹ Was it mere ignorance of the work of the Aragonese heretic, or tampering of his teachings? Just three years after his death at the stake in 1553, Servetus' doctrine was undergoing deformations and biased interpretations of such magnitude that very few people were capable of transmitting it fully, and often at considerable risk to their lives, to other restless thinkers who were dissatisfied with the doctrine taught by the established churches. Furthermore, the author could not rise to reply, few of his books had been saved from the flames, and those who could have spoken loudly did not dare to do so.

What was really the relationship between Servetian doctrine and Islam? If we discard Melanchthon's simplistic response, equating them in their denial of the Trinity, which was the approach taken by the Aragonese heretic, and up to which point was it original and shocking for its time? Which was his concept to Islam, and how could it fit into his theology?

To analyse these questions, we will first see how the context of sixteenth-century Europe conditioned the visions of Islam that prevailed in the West; then we will see how the Muslim religion is reflected, and particularly their holy book, the Qur'an, in Servetus' work, and how did he consider it in his work and during the trial in Geneva in which he was sentenced to death. Finally we will draw some conclusions about Servetus' opinions of Islam.

Building an image of Islam in sixteenth-century Europe

If people think that we are living in a time of clash between Western and Muslim civilizations, the events we see in the media may seem little more than skirmishes when compared to the situation experienced throughout most of the Middle Ages and

the beginnings of the modern age. What was the state of relations between Islam and Christianity in the sixteenth century? On the one hand, the memory of the Crusades was still alive in the minds of people on both sides. The year of publication of Servetus' *Restitution of Christianity* (1553) coincides with the centenary of the fall of Constantinople, which had caused a huge impact in Europe and was one of the reasons that, paradoxically, contributed to the flowering of Italian Renaissance. In the Iberian peninsula, just a few decades had passed since the conquest of the last Muslim kingdom, Granada, by the Castilian-Aragonese alliance. And these important events were not only present in the collective memory of the West, but all Europe lived the Turkish threat as if it were a giant sword of Damocles that was to rush upon them all ruthlessly. In 1526, the great kingdom of Hungary was destroyed in the battle of M6hacs, in which even the king was killed. After that battle, Central Europe was at the mercy of the Sultan's troops. France was not free from threat, as the dreaded Barbarossa sacked the coastal region of Provence in 1519 and captured the city of Nice in 1543. The alarm bells sounded even in Rome when Barbarossa's ships were sighted from the coast, and Venice had to pay a huge amount of gold and give several islands to preserve their independence.

In these circumstances of all-out global war, with only brief parentheses over several centuries in different battlefields and with different human actors, but a common religious reality, the fight in the field of theology was the inevitable ideological correlate of the armed conflict. From the Christian side, it was imperative to affirm the inferior or subsidiary status of the newer Muslim faith, if not its evil nature, to emphasize the Christian preeminence in order to uplift the spirit of believers. John of Damascus, whose grandfather was the man who had surrendered the city to the Arab conquerors, was probably the first Christian author who reflected on the issue and in his work against heresies he does not hesitate to describe Islam as a derivation of Arianism. According to John, Muhammad discovered by chance the texts of the Old and New Testament and, with the help of a Christian monk who was actually Arian, developed his own version of the Christian doctrine (Goddard, 2000, p. 39). For him, Muhammad would not be just a heretic, but also the "forerunner of the Antichrist." We need to clarify that, for John, almost any heresy was announcing the coming of the Antichrist, so he was not making any special distinction by referring to Islam, but there is no doubt that his work had an enormous influence on both East and West, and conditioned all studies that were made on Islam from Christian lands throughout the Middle Ages.

The emergence of the Protestant Reformation did not change much the appreciation of Islam. Martin Luther feared that Christianity might be finally crushed by the Muslim advance and called to strengthen the faith of Christians who resisted the Turks. When asked if Muhammad was the Antichrist, he said no, because Islam was too simple and irrational to have such an important role, but he was convinced that the Antichrist, who was more frightening and insidious, would have to become manifest within Christianity to be more lethal: in fact, he could not be other than the Pope himself! Therefore the enemy outside could only be overcome after the enemy within had been defeated (Goddard 2000, p. 111).

As for Calvin, he also followed the Christian stereotypes about Islam and condemned that the Turks allegedly put Muhammad in a place that corresponded to the Son of God and did not recognize the true God as manifested in the flesh, and in a characteristic way, he concluded that Muslims "are guilty of wickedness and lead so many people to destruction that they deserve to be executed" (Goddard 2000, p. 112). As we have seen, Calvin was prone to send to the gallows all who disagreed with him, not just that Spaniard that had mortified him so much for years.

In contrast, other Christians expressed more nuanced views. Erasmus wrote that few Christians could give lessons in religion, as they were likely to miss the commandments and commit reprehensible acts, saying that he preferred "a sincere Turk rather than a false Christian" (quoted in Bataillon 2000, p. 69). Other authors of the Italian Renaissance such as Nicholas of Cusa studied Islam with a humanistic spirit of reconciliation, and served as important sources of information for young Servetus.

References to Islam in Servetus' work

It is surprising that in his revolutionary early work, *On the Errors about the Trinity*, Servetus already made a direct allusion to Muslim scripture. On the one hand, quoting the Qur'an was not a common dialectical resource and did not enjoy any authority or prestige, and on the other hand, his Qur'anic quotations appear after a string of quotations from the Bible, so that this fragment represents a qualitative quantum leap in connection to the thread that precedes it. This is what he says (Servetus 2004, p. 227):

To what degree this tradition of the trinity was laughing matter for Muslims, only God knows ... And not just Muslims and Jews, but the wild animals

would make fun of us, if they could comprehend this fantastic view, because all works of the Lord bless the One God. Listen also what Muhammad says, because higher credit must be given to a single truth admitted by the enemy than to hundreds of lies from [Christians].¹ He says indeed in his Qur'an, that Christ was the greatest of the prophets, the Spirit of God, power of God, breath of God, God's own heart, the Word born of a perpetual virgin for God's action, saying also that because of the wickedness of the Jews against him, these are now mired in misery and calamity.

He also says that the Apostles and Evangelists and the early Christians were the best men, they wrote true things and had no trinity or three persons in the Godhead, but this was added by men of later times.

This text served as the basis for his quotations from the Qur'an that Servetus included in his masterpiece, the *Restitution of Christianity*, which takes up the issue of the alleged mockery of Muslims, but this time he is much more precise in his quoting, indicating the *suras* that are referenced, he insists a couple of times to call people that make up the divine Trinity "children of Beelzebub," and provides a more detailed list of praises to Jesus in the Qur'anic texts used for reference, ending this section with a brief elaboration on what Muhammad means by "son of God" (Servetus 1980, pp. 165-8).

To begin with, there are several surprising nuances when reading these passages, both in the quick summary of references in *Errors* and in the most prolific and careful list of *Restitution*, namely, the position where he places the Muslims and to some extent, the Qur'an itself. Servet begins by announcing the laughter of the Muslims on the Christian belief in the Trinity, when they, along with the Jews, know perfectly well that it is a false and absurd idea. Therefore, Servetus put Muslims in a position of superiority of knowledge because they had preserved in their holy book the truth about the divine nature, and humiliates post-Nicene Christianity, the official Christianity, making it the laughing stock of other religions. In fact, he wrote that even wild animals would laugh, i.e. he encompassed, so to say, all of Creation in the area of certainty and true knowledge about the divine, whereas Trinitarian Christianity is deprived of such knowledge and sunk in the most absolute ridicule and ignorance.

On the other hand, the Qur'an also transmits, according to Servetus, the reasons for the humiliation of Trinitarianism, since it states that the early Christians knew the true nature of God and lived in truth, but later others corrupted the doctrine. Those others, who Servetus called "sophists", were the ones who introduced Greek philosophical categories in the Gospel message and began the disquisitions on substances, incorporeal entities and divine persons, which eventually produced the dogma of the Trinity, which Servetus equates to tritheism or a belief in three gods. Therefore, it is Christianity that is self-humiliated when leaving the true knowledge, whereas Judaism and Islam remained faithful to the truth about God. As we shall see, this is a devastating and unacceptable argument for the Europe of his time.

As if this was not enough, *Restitution* includes clear references to evil symbols in their Qur'anic quotes when referring to persons of the Trinity, calling them "sons of Beelzebub." Keep in mind that it is also in *Restitution* where Servetus described the Trinity as the three-headed dog Cerberus (Servetus 1980, p. 268), which in Greek mythology is the guardian of hell. This simile would be, as we know, one of the arguments that would lead him to the stake, but a reference to demonic nature already appeared in his quotations from the Qur'an.

Did Servet succeed in the choice of his quotes? Historian and Unitarian minister Peter Hughes studied the use made by Servetus of Qur'anic sources (Hughes 2005, pp. 55-70). In the absence of specific quotations and Servetus' rather careless approach in *Errors*, it seems clear that at that time he did not have any direct translation of the Qur'an available. Indeed, as Hughes says, although there was a Latin translation of the Qur'an from the twelfth century, made in the Iberian Peninsula by Robert of Ketton under the supervision of Peter the Venerable, it was not published until 1543, i.e. twelve years after Servetus wrote his first book. Therefore he could not use any reliable edition. Then, where did he draw his allusions to the Qur'anic text from? There were mainly two works that could be used: the *Cribatio Alcorani*, by Nicholas of Cusa, published in 1461, and *Confutatio Alcorani* by Ricoldo di Monte Croce, which was published in Seville in 1510 and in Paris a year later. Subsequently, both works were reissued in 1543 in one volume along with the translation of the Qur'an by Robert of Ketton in an edition of Theodore Bibliander,¹ and this volume was surely consulted by Servetus while drafting the *Restitution*.

If we think that all this effort of translation and study of the Qur'anic text was due to the noble desire to achieve knowledge, familiarize himself with the wisdom of a

foreign culture, or a spirit of interfaith fellowship, we would be quite wrong. There was no dialogue among religions in that period, but only ideological and political conflict to elucidate what tradition was true or superior, because standing fast to truth assured divine favor and therefore final victory was to be expected. Except for the work of Nicholas of Cusa, showing a more measured approach, both Robert's translation and Monte Croce's book were clearly geared to serve as tools for the refutation of the doctrines of Islam and deny their validity. This makes even more noteworthy that Servetus, ignoring the anti-Islamic bias of these editions, was able to find much to praise Christ and his idea that the truth as revealed in the Qur'anic text was preserved in a way that had been lost in the Christian tradition.

As for the accuracy of the quotes used by Servetus, we must say that he was not always reliable by sticking to the original text, even taking into account the imperfections and alterations that were already present in the reference texts. In his analysis of Qur'anic quotations, Peter Hughes was able to establish a precise correlation between the work of Servetus and the sources used, for example, a wrong numbering change in the suras that Servetus followed faithfully, unaware that the original Qur'an uses a different division. This is not the place to go into the details of these quotes, so we refer to the article mentioned above to serve as reference, but we will simply comment on those cases in which Servetus took some freedom of interpretation. For example, in *sura* 40 (although he believes that it is 50 due to editing errors, as already discussed) he quoted: "We believe in one God, not in those added partners" (*Servetus* 1980, p. 167). As it appears at the end of a string of quotes criticizing the Christian theology of the Trinity, it is understandable that these "partners" would be understood in context as the divine Persons of the Trinitarian dogma. However, in the Qur'anic context this quote makes no reference to the Trinity, but, according to various interpretations of the text, it seems to refer rather to the ancient polytheistic religion of Arabia, or perhaps to an understanding of God based on human reason or other items that people "associate" to the idea of God, rather than relying on pure revelation. Servetus, however, eager to find anti-Trinitarian arguments in the Qur'an, would have been driven by Robert's inaccurate translation and by his own expectations about the meaning of the text.

Although the bulk of Qur'anic quotations were concentrated in this passage of the first book of *Restitution*, this is not by far the only place where Servetus refers to Islam or to Muslim believers, although according to the custom of his time, he often

called them "Saracens" or "Turks." Already in his earlier work, *Dialogues on the Trinity*, he made some direct references to the Islamic faith, such as this one that we find particularly interesting (Servetus 2004, p. 393):

On the other hand, I say that outside Christ you do not worship God any more than a Turk. And all who are away from Christ are pursuing a vision or worship of God as Saracens, so that they make Christ useless. But I say that God is seen and adored in Christ alone...

First, an attentive reader would note Servetus' claim that a Turk can worship God just like any other person. As we have seen, in most of the anti-Islamic propaganda of the era, Islam was a religion that was not only wrong, but fundamentally evil, and only the most condescending ones were willing to believe that it was derived from the Arian heresy. Servet included Muslim believers in the group of people who, even without knowing Christ, worship the true God. The other group that would be out of the "new covenant" brought by Jesus, would be the religion of Israel, who had received the first revelation and had transmitted it in the Torah, and who were under the Law of God. And surely, among those who are "away from Christ... pursuing a vision of God", Servetus also included those Pagans that were best considered by Christians, such as Seneca and Socrates, who allegedly followed the will of God, albeit unconsciously, as the reformer Zwingli had already suggested in his *Statement of faith* (Stephens 2005, p. 291). And yet, in this same fragment, Servet makes clear that God is fully revealed only in Christ, which should make us reconsider some hasty assertions made that Servetus attempted to please Jews and Muslims with his Unitarian theology in an attempt to build a Christianity that could be acceptable to people of other faiths. As we will discuss in our conclusions, Servetus' purpose was far more ambitious than that.

Back to *Restitution*, he wrote at the end of its first book: "Who but someone out of their wits can tolerate such lucubrations without laughter? Such terrible blasphemies are not found even in the Talmud or the Qur'an" (Servetus 1980, p. 181). He was insisting here in his rethorical device to ridicule the rantings of so-called "philosophers" who distorted the original Christian doctrine, calling them blasphemous. Although the text seems to be a negative reference to books of the Jewish and Muslim religions (and note that Servet refers to the Talmud, which was written after Jesus' lifetime, and not the Torah), it is actually mostly a reiteration of his condemnation of Trinitarian teachings, in order to make them even more reprehensible than those who do not recognize God in Christ. This superiority of the believers of other religions over those

who Servetus calls "sophists" can be found again in Book II of *Restitution*, which states that "Jews, Turks and other heathens" can see God just as Christians can, but Sophists "do not see or hear anything" (Servetus 1980, pp. 262-3).

However, it was in Book II of Part IV of *Restitution* that Servet dealt deeper with Islam, leaving aside the Trinitarian speculation and concentrating on specific religious practices. He began with the assumption that Muhammad was inspired by the Bible to design his own religion, seeking differentiating factors with a Biblical foundation, but were modified in some way to give a specific character to the Muslim faith. As we can see, this is a variant of the old theory of John of Damascus on the Arian monk who helped Muhammad. From this premise, he dealt with various aspects of the religion as "adaptations" of the original revelation. In a passage Servetus even wrote that Muhammad "stole" traditions from the Bible, throwing the charge of sacrilege against him. Thus, he wrote that Muhammad took Friday as the "day of rest" for Muslims, modeled on the Jewish Sabbath (this and subsequent references in this paragraph are from Servetus 1980, p. 633ff). However, Servet did not know that Friday is not really a day of complete rest as in the Jewish tradition, but the day for public worship.

Nevertheless, not every alteration seemed reprehensible to him, so he praised the choice of the instrument to call to prayer: "as Muhammad saw that Jews had horns and we used bells, he decided that in their mosques or temples people would be convened by the human voice, because [this instrument] is nobler."

On dietary prohibitions, Servetus believed that Muhammad forbade the wine in imitation of the Pope who refused meat and marriage, although here again he wrote in laudatory tones about the Prophet, by noticing that such Qur'anic prohibition has a Biblical basis, something that the Pope's prohibitions lack.

As for prayers, Servetus made the peculiar assertion that there are five in Islam as a compromise between the three of the Jewish religions and the seven canonical hours in Christianity.

To complete this brief review of the assessments made about Islam by Servet in *Restitution*, he warmly praised again the so-called "Mohammedans" for hating the idols and what he called "popish idolatry." The contrast between the Pope and the Prophet, which he repeated on several occasions, reveals how Servetus had a higher consideration for Islam than he was willing to admit in other parts of the text. The

superiority of Islam over the religion preached by Rome seems obvious and Servetus only regretted that, because of the delusions of the sophists *and not by their own wickedness*, Muhammad did not recognize Christ as the Son of the eternal God.

We may wonder where Servetus got these ideas from on Islam. We think we can rule out what some people say, i.e. that his approach was a result of the influence of the Muslim presence in Spain. It does not appear to be the case and references in biographies of Servetus to the presence of Jews and Muslims in Spain, converts or not, distract rather than provide any positive data on this issue. Moreover, Servetus' life took him to Toulouse in France at a very early age, then to northern Italy, to various cities in Germany and back to France, and finally to Switzerland, far from the territories under the influence of Muslim culture. Therefore all verifiable data suggest that his knowledge of Islam was limited to his readings of the works of Nicholas of Cusa and Monte Croce in his youth, and possibly his reading of the Latin translation of the Qur'an simply to search for citations he already knew. It was probably with these readings, and perhaps also the rumors and comments that he may have heard, that Servetus built his image of Islam.

So many quotes from the Qur'an and so many laudatory comments from the teachings of Islam on the One God could not pass unnoticed, and during the trial for heresy that he was subjected to in Geneva, his accusers were quick to throw it in his face. And they not only did it to find reasons to condemn him, but there was a real fear that the ideas of Islam could spread in Europe. They were the enemy's ideas, and tolerance could only lead, from their point of view, to the weakening of Christian societies: the glorification of Islam was the Trojan horse that preceded the Turkish conquest. As Bainton rightly points out in his biography of Servetus, prosecutors were probably also aware that the land where Arianism had once prevailed eventually fell under Muslim rule (Bainton 2004, pp. 129-30), and in fact we have already seen that many thought that Islam was nothing more than a strange variant of the ancient Arian heresy. By then, the effort to distinguish between the Arian Christology and that of Servetus' was a subtlety of little use for practical purposes. Any questioning of the Trinity was potentially equivalent to Arianism or the immediate or future conversion to the Jewish or Muslim faiths.

Servetus chose a surprising defense, arguing that he was free to quote the Qur'an in those fragments that convey the truth, although he personally disapproved of the book as such, and according to the proceedings of the trial, he also said that he

had no intention of helping Muhammad any more than of helping the devil (Bainton 2005, p. 129).

One might think that these words, although coaxed under pressure, could represent the true thoughts of Servetus on the Muslim faith. However, looking at the texts, this seems highly questionable. In *Restitution*, Servetus did not ever equate Muhammad with the devil. He reserved all devilish images for the Pope and the proponents of the doctrine of the Trinity. And as we have seen, he often considered Islam superior to the religion of the Trinitarians (rather than to Christianity as he understood it), because Islam is faithful to divine revelation as reflected in the Torah and is inspired by it, preserving the concept of God as one and indivisible, and therefore conveys the fundamental truth of religion according to Servetus. Would it not be deeply contradictory that Servetus would think that Muhammad was equivalent or similar to Satan? Could the devil reject idolatrous practices and defend the true doctrine of God, thus preserving for the people the very truth that philosophers had managed to hide in Christianity? Satan being the master of deceit, would the nickname of "evil" not rather correspond to them, the so-called "sophists"? It is certainly untenable that Servetus conceived Islam as something evil, and if he really said that sentence in the terms that were set out in the Geneva trial proceedings and is not a manipulation of the copyists, we may assume that it was a defense against the very serious accusations made against him. Besides, defending Islam was not a priority for Servetus during the trial --he was concerned only about his defense and even his life, so it is understandable that he could have resorted to those arguments that might seem more helpful to achieve this goal.

Some conclusions

It would be a mistake and an anachronism to try to describe Servetus as a scholar of religious diversity or a promoter of interfaith dialogue *avant la lettre*. Servet, admittedly, was not interested in knowing exactly the Qur'an, nor in being acquainted with the Islamic precepts, customs and traditions. Likewise, he did not believe in perennialist or syncretistic ideas. Servetus' primary interest was Christ. The whole Servetian theology revolves around Christ, and he is the focus of his concerns and his spiritual experience. Servetus was, so to speak, in love with the figure of Christ, and used all sorts of arguments and facts at his disposal to defend it. It is primarily from this perspective, from this impassioned love for Him who gave meaning to his existence, and his determination to defend "the true Christ" from what he considers

serious errors and distortions, that we should understand the quotations from the Qur'an in Servetus' works. It can therefore be said that Servetus used the Qur'an in his work, not for its own sake but, as he admitted during the trial, because it confirmed his own ideas on how the relationship of Christ with God the Father should be correctly understood.

However, it would also be unfair to disregard Servetus' contribution just because the Christian-Muslim dialogue was not one of his priorities. As we have seen, his point of view was basically tolerant to Islam, recognizing it as a legitimate, although imperfect, form of worshipping the One God. And therefore, he was willing to accept that a good Muslim believer was as worthy of salvation as any other, as long as he or she honoured God and did good works. This view was in sharp contrast with the prevailing thought of his time. It actually fits well in the liberal and tolerant line marked by the influence of Erasmus. It was a kind of religiosity that was more concerned about the honesty of character and intention than by outward signs and submission to religious authorities (De Marcos 2006, pp. 31-33).

Because Servetus was interested in truth, not in religious affiliations and human institutions, and he devoted his life to this radical and obsessive search. His intention was not to merely reform Christianity, but *to bring it back to its original state* before being deformed by idle speculations. He did not want to develop a new Christian doctrine which could be more attractive to people of other faiths, but simply to uncover the truth. And that truth, once it had been unveiled, was strong enough to break down all barriers that impeded harmony between people of all faiths. If Judaism and Islam had preserved the truth about God and Christ in their respective doctrines, Christianity had to correct its own errors, which started in Nicea and had been kept for over a thousand years, and restore the truth. And that truth would be thus shared by all, and the unity of all of God's children would be finally achieved. That was the dream that inspired Servetus to go beyond the Christian revelation to find the other brethren in the faith of Abraham, know what they said, appreciate the insights that he found there, and open the door so that they could become part of his vision about the world and God.

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Servetus and Unitarianism : The Transylvanian Church



The Unitarian church in Simonesti, Transylvania

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Important historical anniversaries always serve as good opportunities to remember largely forgotten historical personalities and their work. In 2003, on the occasion of the 450th anniversary of his martyrdom, people all over Europe commemorated Michael Servetus, the Spanish physician and theologian. Commemorations will surely continue in 2011, it being the 500th since his birth, and this will lead to a renewal of interest in the life and work of this physician-theologian. In the history of Hungarian Unitarianism 2010 is marked by the name of Servetus' contemporary, Ferenc David, the founder of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church. According to tradition, David was born in 1510 at Cluj (Kolozsvár), and, although they had never met personally, he can rightly be considered Servetus' fellow fighter who made Servetus' theology widely known in Transylvania.

My lecture is about Servetus and Transylvanian Unitarianism and about the troubled history in Transylvania of Servetus' most important work, the *Restitutio Christianismi*. My work was made much easier by the very successful book of Nancy and Lawrence Goldstone, entitled *Out of the Flames*, which has been republished many times. As you may know, the authors' aim was to follow the fate of one of the greatest rare books, the *Restitutio Christianismi*, published in 1553, and to present it, along with the adventurous, although tragic life of Servetus, in the English language. This 350-page book, written with great erudition, could also be read as a historical novel. I am quite sure that the authors must have studied a vast bibliography before writing their masterpiece. Nevertheless, as a Hungarian Unitarian reader I feel sorry for their not paying more attention to the reception of Servetus's teaching in Transylvania and I dare say that they write about the Transylvanian copy of the *Restitutio* only briefly and what they say about it is not really accurate. This, however, is not the authors' fault, but that of those Transylvanian Unitarians, who publish their scientific

works only in Hungarian. Now I shall take the opportunity to talk about Servetus's renaissance in Transylvania.

Ferenc David, and those who worked with him, considered Servetus to be one of the forerunners of the anti-trinitarian reformation who, like his predecessors, Luther and Erasmus, was one of those spies "praising the land of Canaan, each of them bringing good fruit to the people living in the desert of the Antichrist".¹ It is also a well-known fact that the Transylvanian Unitarians, who founded their church in the second half of the 16th century, readily borrowed anti-trinitarian arguments from the arsenal of this Spanish physicist-theologian. Servetus' work probably was brought to Transylvania by Giorgio Biandrada, but we don't know how Biandrada got hold of the rare book. Anyway, it is a fact that the anti-trinitarian works published in Transylvania between 1567-1569 used as a source of inspiration Servetus's two books *De trinitatis erroribus* and *Restitutio Christianismi*.

Naturally the Lutheran and Calvinist opponents also noticed that the Unitarians followed Servetus's teaching, so even in the 16th century it was not a secret for those who were concerned by such questions, that the history of the origin and development of the dogma of Trinitarianism in Transylvania too was taken from the *De trinitatis erroribus*. In the 1920's Istvan Borbely, a teacher from Cluj drew up a detailed chart of the similarities between the *Restitutio* and the *De regno Christi* published in Transylvania in Alba Iulia. In his latest monograph about Ferenc David, Mihaly Balazs, a professor from Szeged University in Hungary gave an accurate enumeration of all the chapters which are to be found in Transylvanian anti-trinitarian books edited by Francis David which were based on Servetus' works. It is undoubtedly the *Restitutio*, which had the greatest impact on European, and therefore, Transylvanian Unitarianism. It is not accidental that under the guidance of Ferenc David and Giorgio Biandrada the *Restitutio Christianismi* was republished in 1569 under the title *De Regno Christi* by the printing press of the Prince of Transylvania in Alba Iulia.

The editors in 1569 dedicated *De regno Christi* to the pious Prince of Transylvania, John Sigismund, and the text of the dedication deserves our attention because in it the editors' tell the Prince, among other things, that "pietism and love died out in Christ's re-born country because false ideas about God and his Son were spread. The sophism of the Greek philosophers was attached to the desire for bloodshed". The introductory lines also contain the editors' opinion about tolerance, and as it was similar to what was written by Sebastian Castellio in the introduction to

his Bible, what comes next in the dedication is the word by word quotation of Castellio's dedication to Edward the 6th. It is well known that this dedication later was included in an anthology compiled by Castellio and entitled *De hereticis, an sint persequendi*. In conclusion we could affirm, that *De regno Christi* is the republished version of the second and third part of Servetus' *Restitutio Christianismi* with a dedicatory letter borrowed from the pen of Castellio. Istvan Borbely, Stanislaw Kot and Mihaly Balazs have also pointed this out.

Let me mention an interesting footnote: in the British Library there is a copy of the *De regno Christi* and on the front page the following inscription: "Servetus castratus" that is, a shortened version of Servetus' work. The texts in *De regno Christi* published in Transylvania in 1569 were grouped in such a way as to build up an authentic work. The alterations or ellipsis within the different units can be well traced: the Transylvanians did not need those thoughts of Servetus which bore the influence of Platonic philosophy and did not take all of his ideas dealing with soteriology. Concerning the problem of free will, their ideas were surely closer to those declared by Calvin as opposed to Servetus. About the year 1570 they mixed Servetus' theological system with that of Sozzini and through the end of the fifteen-seventies they strayed far from the ideas of the Spanish theologian.

However we should not pass over the year 1569 without remembering the widely spread idea, which unfortunately lacks proper proof, that in that year in Cluj (Kolozsvár) Istvan Basilius, a close friend of Ferenc David, composed a song about Servetus. The original song was lost, but we have the refutation of their enemies, and in it we find out that the song called Servetus a martyr and compared him to Stephen, the first martyr.¹ After 1570 the Transylvanians seem to have mostly forgotten about Servetus.

Now let us turn back for a moment to the book written by the Goldstones. This time we will skip the parts presenting Servetus' life and works and will study only the third section entitled *The Trial*. In this part it is the fate of the *Restitutio* which keeps our interest alive. The authors follow with detective-like patience and accuracy the destiny of the three surviving copies of the *Restitutio*, which are to be found in Edinburgh, Paris and Vienna. They draw a portrait of all those who had something to do with any of the copies of the Spanish heretic's most important work. At this time I want to focus on the copy from Vienna because I think that here the writers gave a very simplified description of the history of this, originally Transylvanian book. In order

to help you understand the history of the *Restitutio* in Transylvania, I have to present the situation of the Unitarian church in the 18th century. By that time Transylvania, as part of the Habsburg empire, was under a strong Catholic influence. Beginning in 1724 in Vienna they started to consider the possibility of not letting the Unitarians have a bishop, so in 1728 it was decreed that the bishops were forbidden to lead the church without the permission of the king. Luckily in the coming decades, partly because of the Prussian-Austrian war, the political atmosphere got somewhat milder, and as a result, the elected bishops were granted the tacit royal assent. This however did not stop the Catholics, who knew that Maria Theresa would back them up, from controlling the Unitarian churches, or forcing the Unitarians to be baptized as Catholics. It probably is not an exaggeration to say, that in the time of the Habsburg power, of all the Protestant churches in Transylvania the Unitarians were in the most difficult situation.

The fact that the Unitarian church survived at all is due to God's mercy and to the edict of tolerance issued by Joseph II in 1781. Until 1773 the Unitarians tried in vain to complain about the wrongs which had been done to them, about the churches and schools which were confiscated or about the forced conversions. Hope dawned for them only in 1773, when Joseph II, the son and joint regent of Maria Theresa visited Transylvania and received in audience the representatives of the Unitarians. We are very lucky because all that was spoken on the occasion of that audience has come down to us, as bishop Istvan Agh made an exact account of it. This meeting of historical importance took place on June 26, 1773 in Cluj, at the residence of the parish priest. Istvan Agh handed the document containing the complaints to the joint regent, and after that he answered his questions. The emperor and the bishop spoke to each other in Latin and they naturally discussed about Unitarian dogmas and the Unitarian church. According to the report the emperor showed genuine interest for this rather exotic church in his empire and confessed that it was the first time that he had met a Unitarian. In the document that was handed to Joseph II the bishop merely enumerated the complaints of the Unitarians putting first the aggressive occupation of the Unitarian churches and the forbidding of Unitarian sermons. But the Unitarian strategy did not end there. They were looking for a respectable supporter for their cause and hoped to find him in the person of Samuel Teleki, a Calvinist. We must not overlook this strategic moment, because here the history of the *Restitutio Christianismi* intermingles with the story. The fate of the copy from Vienna illustrates that the

Unitarians did not hesitate to appeal to Miguel Servetus, even if indirectly, if this served their cause.

The history of how a copy of the *Restitutio* was obtained by a Transylvanian Unitarian goes back to the 17th century. Daniel Szent-Ivanyi Markos, later a bishop of the Unitarians, during his peregrination arrived in London in 1665 and there he bought Servetus' work, which was considered a rarity even then. Szent-Ivanyi was not a count, as the Goldstones say, but a humble student, yet he belonged to the circle whose members gathered around the Royal Society and its secretary, Henry Oldenburg. Oldenburg in fact expected the Transylvanian Unitarian student to supply him with important information concerning the mines from Hungary and Transylvania. We also have a vast amount of material about Oldenburg's socinian circle. But for now we are interested in the history of Servetus' book. It can be proved by documents that Szent-Ivanyi purchased the book on May 13, 1665 and we also know that at least four manuscripts were made of it, even before its arrival in Transylvania. Therefore it is no wonder that the "initiated ones" knew about the appearance of this rare book in Transylvania. So did Samuel Teleki, who in the 1760's decided to obtain the hidden treasure of the "socinian brothers" and was ready to buy it. In 1784, on the occasion of the auction of Prince Lavallier's books, an episode also presented by the Goldstones, it was not a secret any more in Central-Eastern Europe, that a perfect copy of the *Restitutio* was to be found in Transylvania. In 1781 the *Ungarisches Magazine*, published in Bratislava, informed its readers that Servetus' book could be found in the library of the respectful and worthy Count Teleki. The Hungarian count donated his library to the town of Marosvásárhely. Today the this collection bears the name of Teleki. Although in 1981 scholars working for the Teleki Library published a thoroughly documented history of the copy of the *Restitutio* kept in Transylvania by the Unitarians, in the introduction of the latest English translation of the *Restitutio* we can read the same old stereotypes. They say that the copy of the *Restitutio Christinismi* from which a facsimile edition was published in 1790 got to the editor from the royal library in Vienna through the benevolence of Joseph II. But the truth is that the german editor Gottlieb de Murr got a manuscript copy from Samuel Teleki in 1786. This served as the model for the *Restitutio* printed in 1790, and de Murr never thought of informing Teleki about his plans.

But how did the book get to Teleki? According to the possessor inscriptions it was the responsibility of the bishops to take care of this rare book. On the colophon

still can be read: “Nunc Michaelis Almasi futuro episcopo dandus” that is: “the book is to be given to the next bishop”. Teleki got this much-desired book from the Unitarian bishop, Istvan Agh as a present in 1780, one year before the issue of the edict of tolerance. Surely the Unitarians considered Teleki to be a man of the future and hoped that he would help them in their fight or at least be able to help them in finding the right man at the Court willing to listen to them.

Teleki could not enjoy his precious book for very long. After having it beautifully bound and ordering two handwritten copies to be made of it, in January 1786, very reluctantly, Teleki donated the original book to the royal Bibliotheca in Vienna. Being totally unaware of the intentions of the German Lutheran scholar, Gottlieb de Murr, he sent one of the handwritten copies to him. De Murr kept complete silence about Teleki's role and about the manuscript that was turned into the re-edited *Restitutio* in 1790. What is more, he even changed the first page of the manuscript which was sent to him by the Count. Presently this manuscript is to be found at Harvard University and the handwriting in it is totally similar to that of the copy kept at Teleki Library in Marosvásárhely. This is natural, because both copies were made by the same person on the order of Samuel Teleki.

Servetus did not save the Unitarians in the 18th century, but the new edition of his most important work turned the attention of the world to this church. In the 18th century somebody wrote on the front page of the book: “Stand still, if you are so beautiful.” But rare books seem to be unwilling to stand still.

We can easily imagine that this book, kept in Transylvania and entrusted to the care of the bishops, was not meant for everyday reading. The students of the Unitarian High School in Cluj naturally knew who Servetus was, because their well-read teachers drew the spiritual portrait of this scholar, denounced as a heretic, with more or sometimes with less sympathy. I made a survey of the most important manuscripts containing the history of the Unitarian church which served as text books for the Unitarian teachers and student of the high school in Cluj. The list is far from being a complete one. I'll mention just two manuscripts from the 18th century, one the work of bishop Mihaly Szentabrahami entitled *The history of the many changes of God's Church*. Here the author presents the “heresies” in the history of the church, which are close to Unitarianism. He writes only a few sentences about Servetus, all of them containing facts and lacking any enthusiasm. The other one is a church history written by Istvan Agh's, in the same century, but this is a more exciting than the previous

lecture.¹ When describing the events of the 16th century among those who had reformed the church, the writer also mentions Servetus' name, even praises him as a doctor for discovering the pulmonary circulation, but he has a very low opinion of him as a theologian, declaring that his philosophy is a dim one. "If we read Servetus' writings about Christ and the Holy Spirit attentively, and compare them to Calvin's teachings of Christianity, we find that the latter is much more Unitarian or at least Arian than the former."¹

This is the essence of Istvan Agh's opinion about Servetus. The *Restitutio* may have been taken out of the coffer where it was kept, although probably only briefly, yet we can be sure, that Agh did not like what he had read in it. The supposition that Bishop Agh "was unable to understand Servetus' philosophy" and therefore he was less reluctant to part with the book may sound a bit exaggerated, yet it may be true. Anyway, it is clear that the bishop was led first of all by church policy considerations when he gave the book as a present to Teleki, whom he considered a potent patron able to sort out the complaints of the Unitarians.

It is not difficult to determine how much the students themselves understood of Servetus' philosophy: practically nothing. But in spite of this, in the Unitarian high schools at Cluj, Turda and Cristuru Secuiesc students were eagerly copying those long and short poems whose writers praised Servetus' martyrdom.

In the archive of manuscripts of the Unitarian High School, presently the sub-unit of the Academic Library at Cluj, there are nine manuscripts written about Servetus' life, five of them being elegies. The composite volumes were compiled mostly in the 18th century and contain 344 lines, that is, 86 stanzas, all of them lamenting the faithful martyr, Michael Servetus, burnt for his true belief.¹ The earliest volume was written in 1741, the last one sometimes after 1773.

We do not know much of the poems written about Servetus. According to some researchers¹ they were written in the 17th century, but they are not similar to the above mentioned song composed by Istvan Basilius. I have already spoken about the retort of the Calvinists, who cast reproach on Basilius because "he dares to call Servetus a martyr and compares him with St. Stephen etc".¹ It is possible that Basilius, being urged by the international circle spreading the poems in Latin,¹ gave an account of Servetus' tragedy in Hungarian.

The poem about Servetus which is found in the Archive of Manuscripts of the Unitarian High School, Cluj has a rather lengthy title: *Következik egy Jesus Christus Tudománya mellett halált szenvedő igaz Martyrnak, ugy mint néhai Servetus Mihály uramnak keserves Historiája, a kiis midön inkább engedelmeskednék Istennek, mintsem Embereknek a' Jesus Christus tudományáért tüzzel meg egető hált [sic!] szenvedé; a mikoronis méltán fel kiálthata a Szent Istvánnal ilyenképpen: Uram nem tulajdonítsd nékiek e bünt mert nem tudják mit cselekszenek Act 7,60.* (Here is the sad story of a true martyr, Michael Servetus, who died for Jesus Christ's teaching choosing to obey God rather than humans and was burnt for Jesus Christ's teaching, crying together with St. Stephen: O, Lord, do not punish them for this sin, because they are not aware of what they are doing).

The content of this manuscript written at the beginning of the 18th century is similar to well known variants of texts therefore in this case too we can rightly suppose that its source of inspiration was the appendix entitled *Historia de morte Serveti* joined to Castellio's *Contra Libellum Calvini*. Castellio's work written about Servetus' death was eagerly copied by the students of the Unitarian high schools. Therefore we possess more than one letter-perfect copy bearing the title *Quomodo judicatus et occisus sit Michael Servetus* (How they judged and killed Servetus).¹

We know about more than one variant of the *Servetus enek* (Song about Servetus) all of them being based on Castello's work. It would be difficult to fit it into one literary genre only, best to say, it is somewhere between a heroic poem and an elegy. It begins with an invocation, the poet asking Servetus, who remained Christ's faithful servant until his death, to come and inspire him to be able to write the poem (1-2). Then, with reference to the cherished symbol of the Unitarians, quotes I Kings 18 and 19, praises the faithfulness of the true ones¹ and begins to tell the story of Servetus' life (3-8).

The dramatic tension of the plot becomes even more accentuated by the description of Servetus being arrested in Vienna and then miraculously released (9-14). We had better not laugh at the poor author, who misunderstood the Latin text and instead of the French town Vienne he translated Vienna, because I can give two other, more horrid examples. Imre Tempfli in his otherwise very well documented work entitled *A Báthoryak valláspolitikája* (Church politics of the Bathories) and published in 2000, when writing about Servetus says (page 23): ".....the *Christianismi Restitutio* published anonymously in Vienna etc". Then in the same work, among the footnotes he gives a

lot of useful information letting us know that the Spanish heretic used to live in Strasburg, Paris, Lyon and Vienna. But let us quote a Protestant author too. The publishing house Kalvin issued in 2003 Willem Van't Spijker's *Calvin's Life and Theology* in the translation of Arpad Galsi, who did not hesitate to write: "Servetus was interrogated in Vienna by the inquisition, then partly on the basis of the evidence got from Calvin on June 17, 1553...etc" (page 86.)

After this intermezzo let us go back to "Vienna" from where Servetus was miraculously rescued and after that went to Geneva, to his former ally, Calvin. In the poem the reformer appears as a bishop, of whose false-heartedness the pious Servetus is totally ignorant and soon finds himself in Calvin's "bloodstained hands" (15-20). Here begins one of the most beautifully elaborated parts of the elegy, the parallel presentation of Calvin and Servetus. The pursued heretic arrived in Geneva on Sunday and naturally he went to church. While listening to Calvin's preaching about predestination he started to weep, but not because he was so impressed by what he heard. He wept because his former ally was presenting to the humble congregation a "false teaching" inspired from "Philosophy" and not from Christ's gospel (20-25). His tears betrayed this foreigner who had just gotten out of prison in "Vienna". A member of the congregation pointed him out to Calvin on whose order Servetus is arrested. The dialogue that follows here reveals beautifully the difference between the two characters. Calvin casts "evil glances" at his victim and accuses him of not believing in the wise "decree" of the Holy Trinity. Instead of giving answers, Servetus asks questions, and Calvin gets so scared that his face goes pale, but he still gathers enough strength to spit in Servetus' face. Servetus keeps talking about Christ and in true saintly fashion lets them put chains on his legs and arms without struggling. Following that comes the description of the miserable conditions in the jail (26-42), and the anonymous author does not spare the prelate from Geneva, calling him "Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate and a friend of Herod". In the next scene (43-47) the action takes place in Calvin's house where a vote is taken concerning the fate of the heretic. Naturally the priests who take part in it want to render a more human punishment, but in spite of the "vox" of the majority, Calvin gives the order to have Servetus burned. This stanza is a masterpiece (45). The verbs "to provoke, to accuse, to condemn, to promulgate" not only rhyme in Hungarian, but also make the reader feel Servetus' helplessness. In two former stanzas we can read about Calvin who convokes, signifies, and provokes, while the prisoner has no one to defend him. It is also significant that

the Catholics from “Vienna” come to almost admire Servetus’ steadfastness, while the Calvinists from Geneva could not but spit upon and scold him.

In the next part of the poem the author calls upon Daniel’s miraculous strength and Gamaliel’s wisdom to save the life of his hero by a miracle, but neither the prophet from the Old Testament nor the wise rabbi can help. Calvin wants to convince Servetus to reject his human Jesus and promises him that should he do so, Calvin would not only spare his life, but would also give him a parish as a reward (48-52). Servetus’ beautiful justification and confession of his faith form a worthy answer to this temptation, but he is brutally stopped by Calvin who gives his victim over into the hands of the executioner (53-56). The poor prisoner is not left alone on the scaffold either, Calvin’s fellow priests keep trying to convince Servetus “to become a Calvinist so that he might not be burnt” (57-59). Then comes the very impressive parallel drawn between Servetus and Stephen the martyr (60). Seeing that they fail to convince him, the priests let the executioner start his cruel task and in the meanwhile they prepare the wreath made of sulphur and tar that will be put on the head of the convicted. It is very impressive the way Servetus confesses his belief in Christ and his readiness to die for him. Even the executioner is so deeply moved, that he refuses to perform his task. But he is both threatened and bribed (60-69) and finally lights the fire and with this act begins Servetus’ agony which might be that of Christ’s too. After the execution Calvin had Servetus’ ashes gathered, cursed them and had them scattered. The author considers that even pagans would not do such a terrible thing (74-77). He is firmly convinced that God, who is always just, will take care of his martyr’s books and will put together his ashes and bones giving him a place in Heaven as a reward (78-79). In the peroration the author urges the reader to remain steady and to have such a strong faith as to be able to become a martyr if this is necessary (80-86).

Let us try to puzzle out the date of this unknown poet’s work:

All the extant copies of the Servetus song were made in the 18th century. In two stanzas, (48. and 64) the author informs us that those who believe in Christ the Man are “even today” persecuted. This however does not make it possible for us to draw far-reaching consequences, because, except for one or two decades between the death of Janos Zsigmond and the issuance of the edict of tolerance there was plenty of time during which the Unitarians of Transylvania had to endure persecution. The fact that the work mentions predestination and we find in it more than one bitter attack against the Calvinists might indicate that it was written in the time of the Calvinist Princes of

Transylvania. But when speaking about the witnesses of truth (3-4) the author praises the faithfulness of those who do not bow their heads in front of idols. The expression “idolater” could refer to the Roman Catholics rather than to the Calvinists. In the peroration we read that “it is necessary for us to struggle, even to go to death” but this does not help much either in dating it. We know that at the beginning of the 17th century the Sabbatarians were subjects of bloody persecutions, and it is generally known that none of the Calvinist Princes of Transylvania was very fond of Unitarians. The fact that the author calls the two churches, the Calvinist and the Unitarian ones by their names might lead us to the conclusion that the song was born in the first decades of the 17th century. The strong beat and the beautiful rhymes also point to this direction, but at the same time we find some themes which are characteristic to the 16th century: for example the parallel drawn between Servetus and St. Stephen supposedly by Basilius, the vehement criticism of predestination that can be traced back to Matthias Vehe Glorius, the *testes veritates* (“true witnesses”) conception hinting at Palaeologus.

These are all plausible hypotheses, yet we should look for some firm arguments. The preserved handwritten copies were without exception made in the 18th century and it is almost sure that the song was also copied in that time by some anonymous student of the Unitarian high school. The *Song of Servetus* was not composed about the thinker and scholar, but about the pious Christian who was willing to become a martyr. The students in those days were not interested in Servetus’ philosophy. It was his infinitely great sacrifice, his martyrdom which made the poet take up his pen during many quiet evenings, by the light of a candle to try to keep alive the memory of the innocent Michael Servetus killed at Geneva and beside him of many others, who gave their lives for freedom of thought.

Servetus and Unitarianism: The Contemporary Legacy



Statue of Servetus
erected in
Villanueva de Sijena

Rev. Dr. Richard. F. Boeke

Chairman, British Chapter, International Association for Religious
Freedom (IARF)

A Minister wrote that she did not care for Michael Servetus. She said that Servetus used harsh language in his correspondence with Calvin and others. I wrote a response which was read with approval by Sergio Baches Opi of the Michael Servetus Institute.

(www.servetus.es) This is what I wrote:

I watched the BBC Production of THE TUDORS last night. It was a reminder of the Bloody Time in which Servetus lived. To understand this time is to understand the harshness of some of the language used in correspondence.

The reminder is also in Nursery Rhymes about "Bloody Mary", who became Queen of England about the time Servetus was burned at the stake in 1553. "Bloody Mary" tortured and burned thousands. Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, prepared much of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. Under Mary's rule, two years after the death of Servetus, Cranmer was burned at the stake in Oxford along with two other bishops.

In the METRO (a London "free paper") I read an interview with Albert Jack, author of Pop Goes the Weasel: The Secret Meaning of Nursery Rhymes. He is asked "What nursery rhyme origin surprised you the most?" He answered: "*Three Blind Mice. It's such a popular little tune and to discover it's really about the violent deaths of three senior churchmen in 1555 at the hands of Mary Tutor was interesting. Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer refused to renounce their Protestant faith, so they were taken to Oxford, tied to the stake, some say blinded and then publicly burned. It's so grisly, it's ironic that it's now a favourite children's rhyme.*"

Esperanza, the breath of hope

“And God ... breathed into the human form the breath of life, and the human form became a living soul.” - Genesis 2:7

High on a mountain overlooking the city of Geneva is the spacious house that was the summer home of French Philosopher Henri Bergson. Bergson wrote of the “*élan vital*,” the vital force that drives life and the evolution of life.

A few miles below the home of Bergson, Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in October 1553. His major crime was denying the Trinity, a crime punishable by death. His major accuser was John Calvin.

One of Bergson’s books is Two Sources of Morality and Religion, “the prophetic and the priestly.” Prophets tend to be solitary figures who challenge the established order. Priests nourish a community, providing the communion of continuity. It is possible to see Servetus as a prophet and Calvin as a Priest. In the book, A Martyr Soul Remembered, Andrew Hill argues that Unitarians owe more to Calvin than to Servetus. For our congregations are maintained more by the community building of pastors, than by the challenges of prophets.

The story is told that once God was having a conversation with the Devil. God said, “*I’m giving humanity a great gift, religion. It will enable them to resist your temptations.*” The Devil said, “*Go right ahead. You give them religion. I’ll organise it.*” Bergson found place for both the prophet and the priest, for Jesus the prophet, and for Paul, the organiser.

Like Elijah, Servetus was stubborn and single minded. He was not a “team player,” but more of a Don Quixote who tilted at windmills. Of course, none of us are like that! I have been known to tilt at windmills. I have been known to follow a lonely path, dreaming an “*impossible dream*” like “*The Man from La Mancha.*” I am not satisfied to be only the priest, the community builder. To me, part of the calling of every minister is to move beyond the givens: to think and act “outside the box.” Servetus built no community, but he left us a heritage of SOUL. He would follow the truth even into the hell of being burned alive.

As Scientist. Servetus discovered the pulmonary circulation of the blood. As a religious seeker, he taught what we can call the “*Ruach Hagofen,*” *the breath of the Holy.* So the meditation masters teach, “*follow your breath.*” Trapped in the organised

business of life? Stop and be still. Get out of the box of reason. Pay attention to your breath:

Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in hope, "*Esperanza!*" In Spanish, the very word for hope is linked to "*inspiration,*" breath. As long as there is breath, there is hope.

Our interfaith group had a session on LIFE OF SOUL. Think of all the ways the word soul enters into life: from Soul Food to Soul Mate. From Faust who would sell his soul to the devil, to Don Quixote, who would "*march into hell for a heavenly cause.*" There is the "soul of a nation" and the "SOUL OF THE WORLD." Individuals and nations that lose their souls become empty shells. They crumble and die. Can an individual soul make any difference?

Yes. One example is Rosa Parks who died not long ago in America. Blacks were required to stand up in the bus, when whites wanted their seat. Rosa was tired. She refused to move. Her stubbornness started the Montgomery Bus Boycott. That boycott made Martin Luther King, Jr., a national figure in the civil rights movement. Thousands refused to board buses. They walked to work. One said, "*My feet are tired, but my soul is at rest.*" Yes, we become weary in well-doing. We become tired of the "War of Civilizations" and "The Battle for God." Yet, when we finish a march against the war in Iraq, we know "*My feet are tired, but my soul is at rest.*"

Servetus lived in a time much like our present so-called "War of Civilizations." Henry the VIII had problems with divorce, like Prince Charles today. In 1553 as Servetus died, "Bloody Mary" became Queen of England. In shifting alliances she married Philip II, the very King of Spain, who later would send the Spanish Armada against England. We condemn "Bloody Mary" for religious zeal, which led her to burn alive an Archbishop of Canterbury and dozens of Protestant Clergy. But what of leaders today who are willing to destroy cities and cultures "in order to save them?"

During the life of Servetus, the new invention of the printing press was changing the world, much as television and the internet change our world today. Christian nations were locked in an ongoing battle with Muslim nations. The last Moorish Kingdom in Spain was defeated in 1492, the very year in which Columbus discovered America. In 1529, Vienna almost fell to the Turks. Over hundred years later in 1683, it took a Polish Army to save Vienna from conquest by the Ottoman Empire.

Today, we are haunted by bombs, bird flu, and natural disasters. A cartoon shows President Bush talking to God. He asked, "*God, why are so many terrible events happening?*" God replies, "*I'm trying to disprove intelligent design.*" In the time of Servetus, Europe was also haunted by death. Luther lost two brothers to the Black Death. In England, the rosy faces of those dying from the plague inspired the song "*ring around the rosy.*" As in America today, there were predictions of the apocalypse and the second coming.

As a boy, Servetus was apparently puzzled as to why the Jews and the Moors refused to accept the doctrine of the Trinity¹. To them it spelled "Tri-Theism" and conflicted with their great affirmations, "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One,*" and the cry of Islam, "*There is no God, but God.*" Servetus found that Mohammed was ready to admit that Christ was the greatest of Prophets. Then, when Servetus studied the Bible, he was amazed to find nothing about the TRINITY. The word is not there.

He became a prophet, declaring that the Trinity is not in scripture¹. While professing a deep devotion to Jesus, he noted "*how much the tradition of the Trinity has become a laughing stock to the Muslims.*" Servetus dreamed of reconciling Christian, Muslim and Jew. For all to share mutual respect in the worship of the ONE GOD. This vision inspired Francis David in Transylvania, a land between Christian and Muslim. In the Diet of Torda, the Unitarian King proclaimed, "*There shall be no compulsion in matters of religion.*" The words are straight from the Quran. Not always observed, but often quoted.

Servetus, like the Muslim Sufis, found God everywhere.¹ He wrote, "*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.*" To this universalism of Servetus, Calvin shouted back, "*Wretch, if one stamps on the floor does one stamp on your God?*" Prophet and Priest collide. So where Luther proclaimed, "*The priesthood of all believers,*" a 20th Century American Unitarian Universalist proclaims, "*The prophethood of all believers.*"¹ Servetus experienced the Holy as a universal soul, animating all things. Last week we observed not only the end of the Muslim Ramadan, but also "*All Souls Day.*" It is fitting that three of the most effective UU Churches are named, "*All Souls.*" In too many Churches and Mosques, the Priests and Imams preach the salvation of some and the damnation of others.

There comes a time to stop talking to God and to listen. To breathe in hope and exhale anger. To stop seeing the world as divided between “*us and them.*” To the individual with Soul, there is always a third party to every encounter. You may call the third party Truth, or Love, or the Holy. But the sense of a greater Soul is essential to the health of our own soul. There is something bigger than the both of us. No book or concept can contain the wholeness of the Holy: Not the Trinity or even the Ninety-Nine Names, which Muslims have for God. Even the word “God” can separate us from God. Let go of words. In “soulful” moments, when we are most alive, we no longer listen to music, we are music.

*“And God ... breathed into the human form the breath of life,
and the human form became a living soul.”*

Worship Resources

Worship to Celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the Birth of Michael Servetus

(1511–1553)

MUSIC : _____

CHALICE-LIGHTING: 'Fiery Spirit', based on words by Michael Servetus.

We kindle this flame
to renew the fiery spirit in ourselves.
for God is in the fire
and God is the fire,
warming us,
guiding us,
and turning our inner shadows
into light.

OPENING WORDS: "To a Heresy Hunter"

"It is a heretic that makes the fire, not she which burns in it." (William Shakespeare, 'The Winter's Tale', II.3)

You called him 'heretic'
and made the fire that burned him.
Not with your hands, perhaps,
but with your words and imprecations.

And yet you worshipped God,
whose other name is Love.
You said you followed one for whom that Love
meant mercy, pity, peace.

You called him 'heretic'
because he spoke the truth as heart and scripture
taught him;
you, whose certainty could show no mercy
though your faith required it.

I ask you now,
in love,
with all the centuries gone,
whose was the greater heresy?

INTRODUCTION: 'The Road to Geneva'

Michael Servetus – Miguel Serveto – was born into an orthodox Roman Catholic family in the small Spanish town of Villanueva in Aragon. His brother, Juan, became a priest and there is no suggestion that Michael picked up any heterodox ideas at home. In his youth he spent some time in the service of the distinguished Franciscan scholar, Juan de Quintana, before going to study law at the University of Toulouse, which had a reputation for theological orthodoxy. Somewhere along the line, though, Michael was developing some dangerously unorthodox ideas. The most likely source for these was the Bible.

The young Servetus studied the Bible expertly and assiduously, and in it he found no basis for some major Church doctrines, notably the Trinity. While still in his early twenties, and after visiting Protestant Reformers in Strasbourg and Basel, he published his first two theological works. They were, 'On the Errors of the Trinity', and, 'Dialogues on the Trinity'. They were not well received!

Servetus was forced to live 'undercover' in France for twenty years, using the alias Michel de Villeneuve. He studied medicine in Paris, afterwards practicing as a physician and writing a book on the medicinal use of syrups. It may have been in Paris that he began to make those groundbreaking discoveries about the circulation of the blood. He studied and wrote on other subjects too – a true Renaissance man. He very nearly met John Calvin while in Paris, but the meeting never took place. Later, the two men corresponded – fatefully, when Servetus was working on his great theological testament, 'Christianismi Restitutio' – 'The Restoration of Christianity'.

Calvin's suspicions were aroused by the book and its radical, Unitarian, theology. Michael's cover was blown. When 'Christianismi Restitutio' was due to be published, both Catholic and Protestant authorities acted to suppress it, and only three copies survived. Servetus himself was pursued and arrested by the Inquisition. He escaped and

sought shelter in Calvin's Protestant Geneva, but it proved no refuge. Servetus was arrested, imprisoned and put on trial for heresy. His book was the main plank of the prosecution case. Duly convicted, he was put to death by burning, just outside the walls of Geneva, on 27th October 1553.

Michael's cruel death at the stake, and Calvin's part in it, have since provoked strong disapproval, but few dared to condemn it at the time. One who did so was Sebastian Castellio, who wrote: "To kill a man is not to protect doctrine, but it is to kill a man. When the Genevans killed Servetus, they did not protect a doctrine, they killed a man." ('Contra libellum Calvinii', 1554)

HYMN: 'Praise God for Michael', by Andrew Hill, 134 in 'Sing Your Faith'

PRAYER & REFLECTION: 'Blood and Spirit'

Breath of God,
which we have breathed since the moment of our birth,
and will breathe until the moment of our death,
we rest in quietness to feel your entry and your exit.

You bring us life,
entering our lungs, entering our blood: carried round
our bodies, through our hearts as they toil without ceasing.
We rest in quietness to feel the circulation of the blood.

Spirit of God,
coursing through our veins almost
since the moment of conception,
enlivening our bodies and our souls
and making us divine,
open our minds to your presence
and our hearts to your love.

FIRST READING: Acts 7: 52-60

“Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the righteous one, and now you have betrayed him and murdered him. You received the law given by God’s angels and yet you have not kept it.”

This touched them on the raw, and they ground their teeth with fury. But Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, and gazing intently up to heaven, saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at God’s right hand. “Look!” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” At this they stopped their ears and made a concerted rush at him, threw him out of the city, and set about stoning him...

As they stoned him Stephen called out. “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” He fell on his knees and cried aloud, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them,” and with that he died.

SECOND READING: From, ‘De Haereticis’ (1554), by Sebastian Castellio

Who would wish to be a Christian, when he sees that those who confessed the name of Christ were destroyed by Christians themselves with fire, water and the sword without mercy...?

Who would not think Christ a Moloch, or some such god, if he wished that men should be immolated to him and burned alive?

Who would wish to serve Christ on condition that a difference of opinion on a controversial point with those in authority be punished by burning alive at the command of Christ himself...even though from the midst of the flames he should call with a loud voice upon Christ, and should cry out that he believed in Him?

Imagine Christ, the judge of all, present. Imagine Him pronouncing the sentence and applying the torch. Who would not hold Christ for Satan? What more could Satan do than burn all those who call upon the name of Christ? O Creator and King of the world, dost Thou see these things?

HYMN: 'God who fills the universe', by Carl Seaburg, 55 in 'Sing Your Faith'

READINGS: From, 'The Restoration of Christianity' (1553) by Michael Servetus, translated by Christopher A. Hoffman and Marian Hillar.

"God is not like a point, but he is an infinite sea of substance, giving essence to everything, causing all things to exist, and sustaining the essences of everything."

"By a natural order, all motions are led back to one prime mover, all natures to one nature, all lives to one first life, through which all other things live and are moved. All ancient authorities said that God lit up everything from chaos... He gave them visible and bright forms in the manner of his own beauty. He is beautiful and good and he made the first light beautiful and good like himself, and then he made everything else beautiful and good as the word of Genesis states."

"Such was the glory of Jesus Christ that his person is depicted in God, the angels, men, the lamb, the calf, the serpent, wood, rock, and other things."

"But let us listen more closely to what Muhammad says about Christ and the Christians...he says that Christ's first disciples were the best and purest of men and that they wrote the truth without touching upon the concept of the Trinity."

"At that time Christ was glorified, was made son anew, and for that reason given to us as a new spirit causing us to rise again in Christ's place. This is the spirit of...sonship that makes us sons by adoption through resurrection. The brotherhood of Christ, or its very mechanism exists through the power of resurrection which has been impressed upon us as brothers: the brotherhood is granted and declared through this new spirit."

"Christ's soul lived a life like our own, and in it was 'the source of all life'. God who breathed into him a human soul like our own, at the same time breathed measurelessly into him the entirety of his eternal divinity."

"All things are one, because all things are one in God, in whom, as the One, they exist."

PRAYER & REFLECTION: 'Many names, always One'

O God, who is the mystery that made the universe
and is the necessity of nature's laws;

O God, who is the creative principle that set evolution
in motion;

O God, who is the breath that breathes life into all
that lives;

O God, who calls humanity into being and gives us
conscience, freedom, and the capacity to love;

O God, who is the voice of the prophets and was
the wisdom of the lawgivers;

O God, who was the Spirit that filled Jesus, making
him one with you, as you are one with us;

O God, who is the universal Spirit, poured out for
the creation of a new world and a new humanity:

In all these aspects we have known you – so many
masks, so many names – but always One God,
as we are one humanity. May it be so!

COMMENT: 'Servetus and the Unitarian Tradition'

Michael Servetus didn't found a church or movement. He isn't the sole rock upon which the Unitarian tradition rests. He was more or less disowned by others who *are* acknowledged as founders of that tradition. This was because they founded their theology more or less solely on the Bible. But Servetus, while holding the Bible as his prime authority, also drew on Greek philosophy, Jewish rabbinical scholarship, the Qur'an, and even Zoroastrianism. This, Faustus Socinus and Francis David found unacceptable. It doesn't mean, though, that they owed nothing to him. David in particular was influenced by Michael's books. And this connects Servetus to the living Unitarian tradition.

Historically, though, the Unitarian tradition in this country owes more to other sources, including the Gloucester schoolmaster, John Biddle, and the Racovian Catechism of the Polish Unitarians. But principally, and ironically, our roots lie in Calvinism, by way of its liberalised Arminian offshoot. Some of our forbears opted for the theological halfway house of Arianism, which Servetus specifically rejected. For much of this period, though, they were often called Socinians, after Faustus Socinus.

So why should we, as Unitarians, celebrate the 500th anniversary of Michael Servetus?

Firstly, because the principal concern of Michael's theology was to assert and defend the Oneness of God, the Divine Unity, as opposed to the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, which he comprehensively and robustly rejected. His arguments may seem strange to us but his was a Unitarian theology in the true sense.

Secondly, because he stressed the full and true humanity of Jesus. Again, the way he did this may hardly accord with our understanding of what this means, and his arguments may seem remote from modern Unitarian ideas. Nevertheless, in his concern to preserve the true humanity of Jesus, to see him as truly our brother, Servetus was pioneering a basic Unitarian affirmation.

Thirdly, we should celebrate him because he advocated religious toleration and abhorred the usual 16th-century idea that the way to deal with your theological opponents is to kill them. As he wrote: "I consider it a very serious matter to kill a man simply because he may be mistaken in some question of interpretation of the scripture, knowing that even the most knowledgeable may fall into error."

On the Divine Unity, the true humanity of Jesus, and the principle of religious toleration, Servetus can be seen as a true – and courageous – forerunner of the Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist movement as we know it.

If we genuinely see our tradition as a living one, inclusive of variety, change, and development, then we should regard Servetus as an integral member of it. If, on theological grounds, we were to repudiate him – along with all those in the past

whose ideas differ from our own – then we wouldn't actually have much of a tradition left!

MUSIC: _____

HYMN: 'A Unitarian Universalist European Anthem', by Mark Belletini (*Reproduced by kind permission of the author*) Tune: 'Beethoven'

From bright strand of far Gibraltar
To the Baltic, grey as slate;
From green slopes of Transylvania
To great London's squares of state,
Our free forbears, questing, speaking,
Singing, writing, roamed this land,
Living in their lives the message,
"One is God: live out your stand."

From the flame that took the Spaniard
To the flame within our hearts
Runs a golden thread of courage
Binding science, story, art.
And we now with pride remember
Rakow's book of studied peace,
Near the Vistula first opened,
Then within our souls released.

From loud echoes of the sermons
David preached before his court,
Through tough text of young Spinoza,
Scandalising Holland's port,
Runs a road, a marvel highway,
Leading all the way to us;
May we humbly, wisely, gladly,
Take up now this ancient trust.

Freedom, reason, tolerance and

Yes, the love that fear can't rend,
Are the way-signs on that roadway,
Bearings leading to its end,
Where we'll find what all the prophets
Spoke in word or lived in deed,
Means and ends are also One as
Flowers sing within their seed.

CLOSING WORDS: 'Your Truth'

*"Grant me now, I ask, your good spirit and effective word;
direct my mind and pen so that I can describe your glory
and express my true belief. The light must not be hidden
and so I must spread the good news or pay the price.
It remains for you, dear reader, to keep yourself
open-minded on Christ's behalf all the way to the end."*

(Michael Servetus, 'Christianismi Restitutio')

We too are concerned with truth;
we too believe that the light must not be hidden;
we too must spread the good news or pay the price.
So may we keep our minds open on Christ's behalf
and the world's, all the way to the end.
Amen.

*Unless otherwise stated all materials were written by Clifford Martin Reed
(CMR070411)*

*This service is derived from a worship pack devised by the Rev. Cliff Reed; available
online from General Assembly website <www.unitarian.org.uk>*

Worship Resources

Servetus : Bilingual Celebration Service

Michael Servetus 500 Years 1511 - 2011

Based on a service at the Servetus Museum, Villanueva, Spain

Music for songs: Singing the Living Tradition & Sing Your Faith

“I consider it a very serious matter to kill a man – simply because he may be mistaken in some interpretation of scripture, knowing that even the most knowledgeable may fall into error.” *Michael Servetus 1511-1553.*

PRELUDE

WELCOME/OPENING WORDS

CHALICE LIGHTING

We light this chalice to honour Michael Servetus,

Burned at the stake in October 1553.

He taught us “*our soul is a breath of God.*”

We light this chalice to honour Francis David

Who died in prison in November 1579.

He taught us, “*You need not think alike to love alike.*”

We light this chalice to honour all those

Who passed on the torch of our free faith.

SONG : Fuente de Amor/Spirit of Life –words and music by Caroline McDade

Fuente de Amor, ven hacia mi

Y al corazon, cantale tu compassion

Sopla al volar, sube en la mar,

Hasta moldear la justicia de la vida.

Arraigame, liberame,

Fuente de Amor, ven a mi, ven a mi.

Spirit of life, come unto me,

Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion,

Blow in the wind, rise in the sea,

Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.

Roots hold me close, wings set me free,
Spirit of life, Come to me, Come to me.

PRAYER

“LITANY OF TOLERANCE” - *SOBRE LA TOLETANCIA*,
by Cliff Reed - Spanish translation, Lillian Burlando

Let us never kill someone because we think them mistaken.

Nunca nos permitamos matar a alguien porque pensemos que están equivocados.

Let us never imprison or torture someone because of difference of opinion or interpretation.

Nunca nos permitamos encarcelar o torturar por diferencias de opiniones interpretaciones.

Let us not abuse someone or impugn their character because we think they have fallen into error.

No abusemos de alguien o impugnemos su caracter porque pensemos que están errados.

We are often mistaken,

Our own interpretation is often flawed.

*A menudo estamos equivocados,
nuestra interpretación propia es a menudo defectuosa*

Spirit of Humility,

Save us from arrogance and spiritual pride.

Save us from having a closed and bigoted mind.

*Espiritu de Humildad,
Líbranos de la arrogancia y el orgullo espiritual.
Líbranos de tener una mente cerrada e intolerante.*

Save us from mistaking our own malice for the will of God.

Líbranos de confundir nuestra propia malicia con la voluntad de Dios.

Remind us that the deepest evil is that which supposes itself virtuous.

Recuérdanos que el peor mal radica en suponernos virtuosos.

HOMILY OR COMMENTARY

MEDITATION : Cliff Reed, from A Martyr Soul Revisited)

Breath of God,

which we have breathed since the moment of our birth,

and will breathe until the moment of our death,
we rest in quietness to feel your entry and your exit. ...
You bring us life,
entering our lungs, entering our blood,
carried around our bodies, through our hearts,
as they toil without ceasing.
We rest in quietness to feel the circulation of the blood. ...
Spirit of God, coursing through our veins
almost since the moment of our conception,
enlivening our bodies and our souls and making us divine,
open our minds to your presence
and our hearts to your love. ...

SILENT MEDITATION

MUSIC : Song -words by J. Rumi (1207-73) music by Lynn Unger

*Ven, ven, come seas, ven,
Nomada en busqueda, si amass al vida
La nuestra es la caravana de amor,
Ven, otra vez ven.*

Come, come whoever you are,
Wanderer worshipper, Lover of leaving.
Ours is no caravan of despair.
Come, yet again, come. (sing twice)

SERMON

OFFERING

HYMN Praise God for Michael (tune "Old 124") (hymn 134 in SING YOUR FAITH)

BENEDICTION & POSTLUDE

Praise God for Michael

Tune: OLD 124TH

Praise God for Michael, honoured child of Spain,
Land of the sunshine, also land of pain.
Jews, Moors and Christians trying to be one
But three-fold dogma means it can't be done.

Praise God for Michael, honoured child of Spain.

Praise God for Michael, true Renaissance man
Who first describes the Holy Spirit's plan,
As like a boy circulates its blood:
So light from Christ disperses in a flood.
Praise God for Michael, true Renaissance man.

Praise God for Michael, scholar of the page,
Student of languages from every age,
Who reads his Bible searching for the Three,
But what he finds is damned with heresy.
Praise God for Michael, scholar of the page.

Praise God for Michael, brazen, wild and bold,
Enters Geneva and the tyrant's fold,
Where he is captured and condemned to burn:
Making a lesson for the world to learn.
Praise God for Michael, brazen, wild, and bold.

"Sweet Jesus, pity, God Eternal's son."
People still struggle, freedom's scarcely one.
May we who honour Michael and his kind
Still work to free the body and the mind.
"Sweet Jesus, pity: God Eternal's son."

It is reported that the last words of Servetus, 27 Oct 1553, were "Jesus, son of the Eternal God, have mercy upon me."

Had he said, "Jesus, Eternal Son of God," he could have been saved from fire.

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Worship Resources

Litany : Our 16th Century Contemporary

(CALL AND RESPONSE)

Servetus studied the stars. He predicted the eclipse of Mars by the moon on 13 February 1538.

In Two thousand ten, U.S. President Obama signed a bill to plan for a manned Mars mission within the next 30 years.

The Spain of Servetus killed and expelled Jews and Muslims.

Hitler's Holocaust killed millions: Jews, Homosexuals, Jehovah's witnesses. Many Christians and Muslims are militant. Some preach Crusade or Jihad.

Servetus was a Scholar, who discovered that the word TRINITY is not in the Bible. He questioned the creeds.

We sense Universal Holiness, a reality greater than any creed.

Servetus envisioned a common spiritual reality worshiped by Jew, Christian and Muslim. He sought to reconcile differences.

*Today, millions work for interfaith compassion, saying with Hans Kung, "There will be no peace in the world until there is peace among religions." **

Servetus was a scientist, who discovered the pulmonary circulation of the blood 75 years before Harvey: the spirit nourished in the lungs.

*"And God breathed into the human form,
and the human form became a living soul."*

Servetus was a doctor, who sought to heal body & soul.

Today, millions practice good diet, exercise, meditation and yoga.

Servetus was a geographer, born a few years after humans first sailed around the world. In his editions of Ptolemy's Geography, he saw our planet as the common home of humanity.

*We live a few years after astronauts first helped us to see Earth from space:
Realize the preciousness of our planet. Realize the need to care for our Home.*

Servetus lived in a time of rapid change. As he was born, da Vinci drew a model of an airplane. A New World, America, was explored by Europeans. Servetus wrote, "It should be named for Columbus." Henry the VIII switched wives and created the Church of England.

A century ago, the First World War had not begun.

Think of the changes in our lifetime.

Servetus was stubborn and single minded. Like Don Quixote, he sought "to dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable foe."

We never know the possible, until some try "the impossible."

* Kung, International Association for Religious Freedom, 1990 Congress. Hamburg.

An Interview with Servetus



adapted from *Calvin and Servetus*
by Louis W. Jones, San Mateo, Ca. U.S.A.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus, you are described in some encyclopaedias as a theologian and physician, and in others as a physician and theologian. Which description do you prefer?

SERVETUS: It makes no great difference. My life's concerns and most of my writings were mainly theological, but most of my earnings were as a practicing physician.

INTERVIEWER: Which of your writings do you consider the most important?

SERVETUS: I put most of my energies into the book entitled *Restoration of Christianity*, and it was this book that led to my being put to death. I may be the first person in history to have been put to death for writing a book.

INTERVIEWER: Your first publication, at age 20, was *Errors of the Trinity*, was it not?

SERVETUS: That is correct.

INTERVIEWER: What impelled you to write this?

SERVETUS: I had gone to see Erasmus and other theologians and tried to convince them that the Trinity concept was wrong, but they would not listen. Perhaps I was abrasive. Then I hit upon the idea of publishing my ideas, in order that all scholars might judge.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have trouble finding a printer?

SERVETUS: Yes indeed. But I found a friendly printer in Switzerland who referred me to a German printer, who printed it anonymously.

INTERVIEWER: Did you identify yourself as the author?

SERVETUS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: You had studied law as a teenager at Toulouse?

SERVETUS: Yes, but I also read the Bible, and was astonished to find there a religion quite different from the one I had been taught. What I had been taught was an inscrutable holy mystery, which I had to profess to believe, and was not allowed to question.

INTERVIEWER: Is it true that you treated traditional scholars with contempt, and even used offensive epithets?

SERVETUS: Yes, but it must be remembered that abuse was quite common in the polemics of that era. My being young and without prestige must have constituted an irritant. It certainly did not help my case. I was the target of a great amount of invective.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus, as to your booklet, Errors of the Trinity, was it well read?

SERVETUS: It was something of a best seller.

INTERVIEWER: What was the main point of the book?

SERVETUS: That the Council of Nicaea, held in 325 had decided wrongly, and that the dogma of the Trinity is incompatible with the unity of the divine nature. Actually, the dogma was adopted by majority vote of the bishops, who were pressured by Emperor Constantine to come to an agreement or else. So the Trinity decision was essentially a political one.

INTERVIEWER: Would you explain just what is meant by the Trinity?

SERVETUS: It is quite complicated, but one essential ingredient is that Jesus was a god, that is, of the same substance as God Almighty, and that three persons constituted the Christian God, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

INTERVIEWER: What does the Bible say about the Trinity?

SERVETUS: Nothing at all. It's solely a matter of interpretation.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus, were you in any way influenced by Martin Luther?

SERVETUS: I was six years old when he took his stand against the Pope. Yes, I was influenced by all the leaders of the Reformation, but I thought they didn't go far enough.

INTERVIEWER: What happened after publication of Errors of the Trinity?

SERVETUS: The book was banned. Copies were destroyed, and orders were issued for my arrest.

INTERVIEWER Why?

SERVETUS: I had questioned the concept that had been accepted for twelve centuries. This greatly disturbed church authorities, and it forced theologians to justify a doctrine that had previously been left untouched. The Church was not ready for any such radical thinking.

INTERVIEWER: Did your ideas gain acceptance?

SERVETUS: Not visibly. But they stimulated thinking in many quarters.

INTERVIEWER: What did Catholics think of your book?

SERVETUS: They were mostly silent at the time. But later some said this was an example of the errors and confusion that Protestantism could lead to.

INTERVIEWER: You say orders were issued for your arrest. How did you elude the authorities?

SERVETUS: I took an assumed name, and entered the University in Paris to study medicine.

INTERVIEWER: Did you receive a degree?

SERVETUS: Not in the formal sense, but I completed the studies and even lectured in certain fields.

INTERVIEWER: While later practicing medicine you were charged with being a quack, mainly because you believed in astrology. Was the charge true?

SERVETUS: I believed that a doctor should be versed in weather forecasting, and in geography, and other sciences as well. I pointed out that Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras,

Galen, Hypocrites and others recognized the validity of astrological medicine. Why have signs been established by the Creator if they may not signify something? I said that those are blind who never lift their eyes to the heavens to behold the most beautiful mechanism of Creation, and that doctors who decline to avail themselves of all aids are ignoramuses.

INTERVIEWER: And then you published a journal article entitled Apology for Astrology?

SERVETUS: Yes, although the faculty at the University sought to prevent it. I was later brought to trial for medical heresy -- for being insolent toward certain faculty Members and I was disciplined.

INTERVIEWER: Let's move on to your most important writing, the Restoration of Christianity. How old were you when you wrote this?

SERVETUS: I finished it in 1553, or at age 42. I had mulled it over for ten or more years while practicing as a physician, and while editing numerous geographies and Bible translations.

INTERVIEWER: What did you expect to accomplish by the book?

SERVETUS: I sought to effect a reformation enormously superior to Calvin 's, Luther's and Zwingli's. I was proposing what I sincerely thought was genuine Christianity.

INTERVIEWER: Did you discuss your book with Calvin beforehand?

SERVETUS: No. I could never get to see him. I sent him a manuscript of the book and we corresponded for a while. Later I asked him to return the manuscript and never got an answer. I knew then I was in trouble.

INTERVIEWER: Catholics in Vienne, France, burnt you in effigy in 1553, along with five packages of your book. Do you feel that Calvin, over in Geneva, Switzerland, had anything to do with it?

SERVETUS: He must have. It was the manuscript - the same one -I had loaned him years earlier - that showed up at the trial at which I was convicted.

INTERVIEWER: After your escape from Catholic authorities in France, and after you were burned in effigy why did you seek refuge in Geneva, Switzerland, the city under Calvin's domination?

SERVETUS: I am going to let historians speculate as to whether this was merely a stopover on the way to sanctuary in another country, like Italy where I had friends, or whether I still expected to conciliate Calvin at a personal interview or whether I was acting out a death wish. Of course, any place was safer than Catholic France

INTERVIEWER: And you were immediately arrested in Geneva?

SERVETUS: Yes, and it was a breach of international law. I had committed no offence in Geneva. None of my books had been written or printed there.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus, the record shows that during the trial you charged Calvin with being an assassin, a liar, slanderer, and otherwise vilified him. Is that true?

SERVETUS: Yes I had been rotting in prison, like a mangy dog left to die upon a dunghill, befouled by my own excrement, shackled in irons, clad in stinking rags, wearied by sleepless nights, and worried about the malicious insinuations about my sex life. I am afraid I lost my self-control.

INTERVIEWER: What was your reaction when you learned of the sentence?

SERVETUS: In my cell I had vainly imagined that I had perhaps convinced the judges of the soundness of my thesis. So, when the man came to the cell and read the sentence I am afraid I broke down with grief, but only temporarily.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus can you explain why Protestants, who broke away from the Catholic Church because of differences of opinion, should persecute other Protestants for their differences of opinion?

SERVETUS: The Protestant movement was founded on the right of everyone to his own interpretation of scripture. Thus the very notion of "heretic" is absurd. Voltaire called my execution the first "religious murder" of the Reformation, and a plain repudiation of the basic Protestant idea. Luther and other Protestant notables were opposed to such punishment. Luther, for instance, said, quote: Heresy is a spiritual affair which cannot be washed away by earthly fire or earthly water. Heretics must not be

suppressed or held down by physical force, but only combated by the word of God...I can by no means approve that false doctors shall be put to death, unquote.

INTERVIEWER: Dr Servetus, you are credited with discovering the pulmonary circulation of the blood, that is, that blood circulates through the lungs and back to the heart. Yet this discovery was published not in a medical paper, but was buried in a theological paper, namely, your Restoration of Christianity, for which you were burned at the stake. How is it that you could mix medicine and theology in this fashion, and what was Christianity to do circulation of the blood?

SERVETUS: This may be difficult to explain. In those days, one branch of learning blended into another. Medicine, theology, astronomy, astrology, anatomy, mathematics and law were all closely interrelated.

INTERVIEWER: But Christianity and blood circulation?

SERVETUS: To put it simply I believed that all life and matter were interrelated, and that the blood had to be purified in some way, or as the, say, to be aerated, and this had to be done in the lungs, where the divine spirit, in the form of air, was inhaled.

INTERVIEWER: Wasn't this pure conjecture on your part?

SERVETUS No indeed. My studies of anatomy showed that the blood did not seep from one side of the heart as had been taught for 14 hundred, but that it actually flowed from the right side of the heart to the lungs and then back to the left side of the heart.

INTERVIEWER: We still don't understand how this medical discovery got into a book on Christianity.

SERVETUS: It was part of my proposal for a return to true Christianity. I thought at the time that soul and spirit were pretty much the same, and that soul is in the blood, not static, but coursing throughout the body. There is Scriptural support for this idea, namely, Genesis 9:4 and Leviticus 17:11.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus, we want to explore your beliefs thoroughly. You believe in separation of church and state?

SERVETUS: Yes, and said so in my writings. It was a revolutionary idea at the time. You know from your history that church and state were virtually one from the days of Emperor Constantine. In those days there was no other form of rule.

INTERVIEWER: Briefly, what was your religious belief?

SERVETUS: I believed that, by and large, God as incomprehensible, but that there was a divine spirit that permeated all things. I wrote that God fills all things, even Hell itself. Some people have characterized me as a pantheist, but it is more accurate to say I was an Emanationist.

INTERVIEWER: And your belief about Jesus Christ?

SERVETUS: That he was the foremost example of the divine spirit or essence.

INTERVIEWER: And about man, or humankind?

SERVETUS: That every person is infused with divine spirit. You can also call it love. I believed that faith alone does not suffice, for it will pass away, whereas love and love alone abides. As I said then, faith lights the lamp which is kept burning by the oil of love.

INTERVIEWER: And your view about the church as an institution?

SERVETUS: Simply fellowship of the spirit on Earth.

INTERVIEWER: Original sin?

SERVETUS: I believe that the inward person cannot sin, but the inward person is not the whole person and we repeatedly fall short.

INTERVIEWER: Baptism?

SERVETUS: I believe that children should not be baptized but dedicated. Baptism for adult is all right at around the age 30, the same age at which Jesus was baptized.

INTERVIEWER: But why shouldn't children also be baptized?

SERVETUS: In my view baptism is meaningless unless preceded by faith and repentance, which are inconceivable as children. I called infant baptism a detestable abomination.

INTERVIEWER: You were convicted in Geneva on two counts of heresy. What were these?

SERVETUS: Denial of the Trinity and denial of infant baptism.

INTERVIEWER: It still remains a mystery as to why you sought conciliation and understanding with the man, John Calvin, who ultimately brought about your death. Can you clarify?

SERVETUS: You see, Calvin himself in his earlier years had questioned the dogma of the Trinity. He once declared that the Nicene Creed was better fitted to be sung as a song than recited as a confession of belief. There were signs of wavering orthodoxy, and I thought Calvin was my best bet, especially since he was a leader of great influence in his chosen country, Switzerland.

INTERVIEWER: Were you the first individual to challenge the Trinity doctrine?

SERVETUS: No. I merely built on the thinking of scores of scholars and theologians in the previous 14 centuries, beginning with Arius at the Council of Nicea, the bishop who was outvoted. I maintained that the Trinity idea was adopted because of political pressures and a desire to reconcile Judeo-Christian teaching with Greek philosophy. There were many anti-Trinitarian tendencies. I was merely the first to go public.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus, nowadays when a person has a "cause" he recruits followers and begins a campaign to change public thinking. Why didn't you do this?

SERVETUS: It wasn't my way I was merely a scholar, and all my writings were for other scholars. I wanted discussion, and refutation if possible, and I got only condemnation. The general public, moreover, was commanded to believe this or that.

INTERVIEWER: How was this done?

SERVETUS: Three emperors of the Holy Roman Empire had issued orders to believe in the Holy Trinity. Freedom of the mind did not exist in those days. Ideas about religion and government were formulated at the top, and passed down. People were simply

told, what to believe. I sought to bring my influence to bear on the formulation of doctrine, not on its acceptance.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus, in one of your letters to Calvin you said, quote, Instead of one God you have a three-headed Cerberus [pronounced SURberus], instead of a faith you have a fatal dream, and you say that good works are nothing but empty pictures, unquote. Do you mean to imply that good works are an essential part of Christianity?

SERVETUS: Yes, and Calvin, with his doctrine of predestination, thought it made no difference.

INTERVIEWER: What did Catholics think about Calvin's charging you with heresy?

SERVETUS: Well , one French Cardinal said it was like one heretic accusing another.

INTERVIEWER: Luther and Calvin are today known as leaders of the Protestant Reformation. What did you propose to accomplish that they did not?

SERVETUS: They simply did not go far enough. They did not reach the heart of the matter.

INTERVIEWER: Getting back to theology, you believed that God is everywhere. Then, in your view, if I stamp my foot on the floor, I am stamping on God. Isn't that absurd?

SERVETUS: I have no doubt that a bench or anything is substantially God. My fundamental principle is that all things are a part and portion of God and the nature of things is the substantial spirit of God. If you say that in stamping your foot you did not move in God, you must therefore, have moved in the devil. We move and are in God in whom we live. Even if you are a blind demon you are sustained nevertheless by God.¹

It was this same point that infuriated my accusers at Geneva.

INTERVIEWER: The record shows that most protestant leaders approved of your being burned at the stake. Had they read your book?

SERVETUS: None of them had read it studiously, and most had never even seen it. Every copy was burned except three. They took Calvin's word for everything.

INTERVIEWER: There were charges against your character, and even your sex life, at the Geneva trial - is that correct?

SERVETUS: Yes, but they were false. I had lived as a sincere and virtuous Christian, and my only desire was to correct some longstanding errors of doctrine. Actually I believed in the Trinity, not as three persons or three substances, but only as three manifestations of the one divine spirit.

INTERVIEWER: But Calvin at the trial said you tried to extinguish sound doctrine and overthrow all religion?

SERVETUS: He distorted my position. Our differences about the Trinity were, in retrospect, very slight.

INTERVIEWER: At the Geneva trial, were you allowed the benefit of counsel?

SERVETUS: No.

INTERVIEWER: You knew you were courting death?

SERVETUS: Yes, but somehow I was unable to believe that a progressive Christian, such as Calvin, would permit a death penalty. I thought, foolishly perhaps, that he would advocate exile or some other punishment.

INTERVIEWER: And you got, instead, death by burning at the stake?

SERVETUS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did you request death by the sword, that is, beheading?

SERVETUS: Yes. I was afraid that during the torture of burning I would recant. My request, however, was denied. The judges must have thought burning alive was necessary to extinguish unwelcome ideas.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Calvin said you yourself probably believed that heretics should be put to death. Is this true?

SERVETUS: No, and I wasn't really a heretic. I was a devout Christian. I had studied the Bible thoroughly in the original Greek and Hebrew, and had edited and translated

several editions. Discussing possible errors in prevailing theology, exactly as ancient theologians did, could not rightly be construed as heresy.

INTERVIEWER: One final question. Do you think political considerations entered into your sentence at Geneva?

SERVETUS: Yes. The final decision was made not by the clergy but by magistrates of the Swiss cities. These magistrates feared that the opposition party would somehow adopt my position and thus gain power.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you, Dr. Servetus.

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