

## MICHAEL SERVETUS 1511-1553

### WORSHIP MATERIAL FOR A QUINCENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

Compiled by the Rev. Cliff Reed

The worship material below is in addition to the Worship Pack - available on the GA web site, and in hard copy from Unitarian Headquarters.

(Note: Unless otherwise stated, all material is by Cliff Reed)

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#### 1. WORDS FOR WORSHIP

*Items marked \* were previously published in, 'A Martyr Soul Remembered'. Some were used during the ICUU commemoration of the 450<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Death of Michael Servetus, held in Geneva, 24<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> October 2003.*

#### **CHALICE-LIGHTINGS & OPENING WORDS**

##### **PRIMAL LIGHT\***

We kindle this light,  
symbol of the essential and primal light  
that shone forth from the person of Jesus  
and those of all true messengers,  
to flood our souls with God.

##### **FLAME OF THE SPIRIT\***

Flame of the Spirit, blazing in the wind of Pentecost.  
Flame of the martyrs' witness, blowing in the gales of history.  
Flame of our liberal faith, rising from the crescent earth  
to celebrate our blue planet and its web of life.

Chalice of humanity, calling all to share  
God's grace and bounty with justice and equality.  
Chalice of the common cup, welcoming without condition  
all who come to worship in goodwill.  
Chalice of our world community,  
from which we drink the wine of love  
to make us one in freedom.

## **THE 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.

## **OUT OF THE UNKNOWN DARKNESS**

***Based on words by Michael Servetus***

“Just as God was the Word,  
the Spirit and the Light in the  
cloud, so now he is the Word,  
the Spirit and the Light in Christ.”

Out of the unknown darkness came the Light –  
Into the primeval darkness came the Light –  
To the people who lived in darkness came the Light –  
We kindle our own small light to remind us of the darkness  
in which we must reflect the one great Light that is Divine.

## **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.

### **DISMISSAL\***

As the flame is extinguished,  
the spirit rises;  
let us go from here in peace and love.  
May it be so!

## **PRAYER AND REFLECTION**

### **SEEING DIVINITY**

*Based on words by Michael Servetus*

O God,  
whose Divinity in a stone is stone,  
whose Divinity in gold is gold,  
and whose Divinity in wood is wood,  
open our eyes to see your  
Divinity in the fruits of the earth  
as their essence, their fruitfulness  
and their goodness.

And help us to know that your  
Divinity in the human is our humanity,  
in the human spirit, our spirits.

So may we come to see your Divinity  
in all creation and in all people,  
knowing our oneness with you  
and open to your loving Spirit.

### **THE DIVINE IMMANENCE\***

O God, who we see in the true saints and great souls of humankind,  
whose Spirit burned in Jesus as a in a lantern to show us the way,  
help us to know that you are present everywhere in your creation.

In the very fruits of the earth, in the animals; in stones and pearls  
and metals and all treasures, you are there.

You are in the showers and the clouds, in the thunder  
and the lightning, in the winds and the sunshine.

In the lion and the eagle, in the turtle and the dove,  
in the calf and the lamb and in all that lives, you are there;

In people as they live and die, work and dance,  
sing and pray, rejoice and grieve.

In all you are there and always were, and - as we came to see –  
in him who showed to us your boundless love.

### **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.

### **DIVINE UNITY\***

O Thou,  
whose oneness includes and embraces all  
that has been made and has come to be.

O Thou,  
in whom all things are present and  
who is present in all things.

O Thou,  
in whom there is no division, a Divine Unity  
whose expression in humanity found focus  
and symbol in Jesus, our brother;

Help us to know what it is to be God's child,  
and so be fit vessels of your universal presence.

### **THE UNIVERSAL CONSCIENCE\***

Whatever our quality of faith concerning God,  
whatever name we use to praise the Ultimate,  
whatever sacred way we claim to take,  
whatever sage or prophet we invoke,  
whatever avatar or epiphany we say  
commands our heart,  
it will suffice – if we act rightly  
according to conscience.

At the last, may the testimony of conscience alone  
witness to a life that healed and blessed the world  
as best it could. And in that may we be granted peace.

### **IN THIS SEASON\***

In this season of the fall,  
we remember the true martyrs of our faith -  
and all faiths.

To the cross and the stake, the dungeon and the gas chamber;  
to death by club and axe and bullet they went;  
and with them went the One God,  
fully present in all their human suffering,

fully present in all their human courage and integrity,  
fully present in the love that binds us to them,  
fully present in the process that brought us all  
out of nothingness.

O God, who lives and makes us live,  
who is the Spirit of all who live and die for human good,  
may we know that you are One and we are One in you.  
Amen.

### **NOT OUT OF HELL\***

***Responsive reading based on words by Michael Servetus***

*“Not out of hell shall we rise,”*  
save that of our own making;

*“Nor future judgement shall we dread,”*  
save that of our own conscience;

*“Gifted already with eternal life,”*  
as we are, if we did but know it;

*“To which might Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, conduct us all,”*  
as we become aware of his Spirit’s leading;

*“For he is of this eternal life author and finisher,”*  
the Divine within ourselves and all creation.

### **MANY NAMES, ALWAYS ONE**

***With thanks to Michael Servetus***

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 law-givers;  
O God, who was the Spirit that filled Jesus,  
making him one with you as he is 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!

## **ONE GOD\***

O God,  
you come to us in all the multifarious wonders of Nature,  
yet you are One God.

O God,  
you come to us in the infinite personalities of our one humanity,  
yet you are One God.

O God,  
you come to us in all the myriad promptings of love,  
all the outpourings of creativity, all the strivings for one global commonwealth,  
yet you are One God.

O God,  
you come to us in all the great souls of our kind,  
in all who have received your divine anointing, inwardly done,  
and so borne true witness to your Spirit,  
yet you are One God.

O God,  
you come to us in the fellowship and compassion  
that makes of our variety one body, for you are One God,  
known and active in so many ways,  
the binding, breathing Oneness of your creation.

## **ALL THE WORKS OF THE LORD\***

“All the works of the Lord bless the one God.”

*Michael Servetus, ‘On the Errors of the Trinity’, 1531*

“For our soul is a certain light of God, a spark of the spirit of God,  
having an innate light of divinity.”

*Michael Servetus, ‘Christianismi Restitutio’, 1553*

All the works of the Lord bless the one God,  
and praise rises from the beasts of the field and  
the birds of the air; all that crawls on the earth  
and swims in the waters.

All the works of the Lord bless the One God,  
and prayers rise from Christian, Jew and Muslim;  
acceptable are the devotions of all who worship  
in love and humility.

All the works of the Lord bless the one God,  
known to us in so many forms, so many dispositions.  
We too are members and sharers in the Divine Unity,  
called to be temples and instruments of the one Spirit.

And so we pray  
that the spark and light of God will glow  
brightly in our souls and in our lives.

## **ON TOLERANCE\***

*"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 ones may fall into error."*

*Michael Servetus, in a letter*

Let us never kill someone  
because we think them mistaken.

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

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

We are so often mistaken, our own interpretation is so often flawed,  
we are so often wrong about so many things.

Spirit of Humility, save us from arrogance and spiritual pride,  
save us from having a closed and bigoted mind.

Save us from mistaking our own malice for the will of God.  
Remind us that the deepest evil is that which supposes itself virtuous.

## **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?

## WHY REMEMBER?

Why should we remember them,  
these men and women,  
remote from us in time or place  
or even in the details of belief?  
Why should we call them martyrs for *our* faith?

Some died because they said, each in their own way,  
that God is One and Jesus was our brother:  
like Katharine Weigel, burned in Krakow;  
like Michael Servetus, burned in Geneva;  
like John Biddle, turned out from Newgate's  
noisome filth to die.

Some died because they stood for freedom, justice, and humanity:  
like Norbert Capek, who defied Nazi tyranny and paid the price in Dachau;  
like James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, answering King's call to Selma  
to march for Civil Rights;  
like Toribio Quimada, standing with his people in the Philippines  
and murdered by their oppressors.

Why should we remember them, the named and the unnamed?  
Because of their loyalty to conscience;  
because of their courage in the face of violence and death;  
because of the faith that gave them strength;  
and because, although persecuted, they persecuted no one.

They could all have taken the easy path but, like Jesus,  
they didn't shirk the hard one.  
In love, we remember them and, in our weakness,  
ask that we may be spared the test they faced.

## 2. HYMNS

### **'Sing Your Faith' (The "purple book"):**

16, 'Captive voices cry for freedom'; 32, 'Earth was given as a garden'; 42, 'From the light of days remembered'; 50, 'God of every stone and pebble'; 55, 'God who fills the universe'; 87, 'Leave behind your bags and baggage'; 134, 'Praise God for Michael, honoured child of Spain'; 158, 'The flame of truth is kindled'; 164, 'The secret pulse of freedom throbs'; 180, 'View the starry realm of heaven'; 213, 'Where science serves and art inspires'.

### **'Hymns for Living' (The "green book")**

6, 'O Sons and Daughters, lift every voice!'; 10, 'Thou One in all, thou All in one'; 17, 'We sing now together our song of thanksgiving'; 46, 'Breathe on me, Breath of God'; 69, 'Praise to the :Living God'; 78, 'We will honour Michael'; 120, 'Life of ages, richly poured'; 129, 'It sounds along the ages'; 133, 'My life flows on in endless song'; 134, 'Faith of the larger liberty'; 138, 'O help the prophet to be bold'; 208, 'Forward through the ages'; 237, 'Seek not afar for beauty; lo it glows'; 238, 'Mysterious Presence, Source of all'.



**'Hymns of Faith and Freedom' (The "red book"):**

12, 'O God, whose presence glows in all'; 52, 'Thou One in all, thou all in one'; 65, 'God of the earth, the sky, the sea'; 67, 'Seek not afar for beauty; lo, it glows'; 68, 'Mysterious Presence, Source of all'; 177, 'Breathe on me, Breath of God'; 224, 'Our founders' faith, we'll sing of thee'; 232, 'Forward through the ages'; 238, 'To us have distant ages'; 239, 'From age to age how grandly rise'; 242, 'Wherever through the ages rise'; 297, 'They live the longest who live well'; 299, 'Father, hear the prayer we offer'; 317, 'O help the prophet to be bold'.

***A Unitarian Universalist European Anthem - 87. 87. D tune: 'Beethoven'  
(Reproduced by kind permission of the author)***

From bright strand of far Gibraltar  
To the Baltic, grey as slate;  
From green slopes in 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,  
Scandalizing 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.

*Mark Belletini*

### 3. BIBLE READINGS

These have been chosen because they are appropriate to some aspect of Servetus's life or theology, such as: his martyrdom, the Oneness of God; the successive modes or dispositions in which God operates; the significance of light; the crucial spiritual role of breath and breathing; the intimate relationship of the Divine and Nature; the humanity of Jesus and his role as God's Anointed; the universality of God; and, the Resurrection as a transcendent cosmic event. Some of them are texts specifically cited by Servetus.

Genesis 1: 1-5; 29-31; Genesis 2: 4-7  
Deuteronomy 6: 4-9; Deuteronomy 12: 20-25  
Job 38: 1-15, 28-33  
Psalm 8: 3-8; Psalm 36: 5-9; Psalm 104: 24-34  
Proverbs 3: 13-20  
Isaiah 44: 6-8, 23-25; Isaiah 45: 5-12; Isaiah 55: 6-11

Mark 10: 17-18; Mark 12: 28-31  
John 1: 1-5; John 16: 1-7  
Acts 7: 52-60; Acts 10: 34-38; Acts 17: 24-28  
Romans 8: 26-29  
I Corinthians 15: 35-44  
II Corinthians 4: 16 – 5: 5; II Corinthians 12: 1-4  
Ephesians 1: 17-22  
Philippians 1: 12-18; Philippians 2: 5-11  
Colossians 3: 1-2  
Revelation 21: 1-5a, 22-26, 22: 1-2

### 4. OTHER READINGS

*Extracts from 3<sup>rd</sup> century Gnostic Christian sources not re-discovered in their entirety until 1945 but which, in some respects, anticipate Servetus.*

#### **Gospel of Thomas**

Salome said, "Who are you, man, that You, as though from the One, have come up on my couch and eaten from my table?"

Jesus said to her, "I am He that exists from the Undivided. I was given some of the things of My father."

Salome said, "I am your disciple."

Jesus said to her, "Therefore I say, if he is undivided, he will be filled with light, but if he is divided, he will be filled with darkness."

Jesus said, "It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the All. From me did the All come forth, and unto Me did the All extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. lift up the stone, and you will find me there."

#### **Gospel of Philip**

The soul of Adam came into being by means of a breath, which is a synonym for Spirit. The spirit given him is his mother.

Adam came into being from two virgins, from the Spirit and from the virgin earth. Christ, therefore, was born from a virgin to rectify the fall which occurred in the beginning.

*(‘The Nag Hammadi Library in English’, pp. 124-5, 126, 142, 143)*

The 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century British theologian, **Pelagius**, anticipated Servetus in his belief that God is immanent in the Creation. Like Servetus after him, and the Gnostics before him, Pelagius was condemned as a heretic by the mainstream 'orthodox' Church.

#### **From a letter to an elderly friend**

Look at the animals roaming the forest: God's spirit dwells within them.

Look at the birds flying across the sky: God's spirit dwells within them.

Look at the tiny insects crawling in the grass: God's spirit dwells within them.

Look at the fish in the river and the sea: God's spirit dwells within them.

There is no creature on earth in whom God is absent. Travel across the ocean to the most distant land, and you will find God's spirit in the creatures there. Climb up the highest mountain, and you will find God's spirit among the creatures who live at the summit.

When God pronounced that his creation was good, it was not only that his hand had fashioned every creature; it was that his breath brought every creature to life.

Look too at the great trees of the forest; look at the wild flowers and the grass in the fields; look even at your crops. God is present within all plants as well.

The presence of God's spirit in all living beings is what makes them beautiful; and if we look with God's eyes, nothing on earth is ugly.

*(The Letters of Pelagius', no. 71)*

**Michael Servetus** wrote a number of letters during his imprisonment in Geneva, from 13th August 1553 to his execution on 27th October. From them we can get some idea of the conditions in which he was kept. Calvin often came to argue with Servetus but doesn't appear to have done anything to relieve his miserable plight. Here are extracts from two of those letters, written to the city authorities.

#### **September 15<sup>th</sup> 1553**

I humbly ask that you shorten these long delays or acquit me from the criminal accusation. You see that Calvin is at a dead end, not knowing what to say and for his pleasure wishes to make me rot here in prison. The lice eat me alive, my clothes are torn and I have nothing for a change, neither a jacket nor a shirt, but a bad one. I have sent another request to you which was according to God, but in order to impede it Calvin cited you Justinian. Certainly it is malicious to allege against me what he himself does not believe what Justinian said about the Holy Church, about bishops, about clergy, and other matters of religion... It is a great shame on his part, the more so that already for five weeks he keeps me locked up here and he has not alleged against me a single passage.

My lords, I have also asked you for a procurator or an advocate who would speak on my part...For being a stranger ignorant of the customs of this country I cannot defend myself.

#### **October 10<sup>th</sup> 1553**

It is now three weeks as I have sought and asked for an audience and I been unable to obtain one. I beg you for the love of Jesus Christ not to refuse me what you would not refuse a Turk, who would seek justice from your hands...

As for what you commanded that something be done to keep me clean, nothing had been done and I am in a worse condition than before. Moreover, the cold distresses me greatly, because of my colic and rupture, causing me other complaints which I should be ashamed to describe. It is a great cruelty that I do not have permission to speak if only to remedy my necessities. For the love of God, my lords, give your order for pity or for duty.

*(Hillar & Allen, 'Michael Servetus', pp. 164-165 & 169)*

**Sebastian Castellio**, although he did not endorse Servetus's theology, was the first publicly to condemn his execution. Himself a refugee from Calvin's Geneva, Castellio held Calvin primarily responsible for Servetus's death. His passionate testimony on the matter was important in the development of religious tolerance. Here are two examples.

**From, 'Contra libellum Calvini' (written 1554 but not printed until 1612)**

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 protect a doctrine, they killed a man. To protect a doctrine is not the magistrate's affair (what has the sword to do with doctrine?) but the teacher's. But it is the magistrate's affair to protect the teacher, as it is to protect the farmer and the smith, and the physician and others against injury. Thus if Servetus had wished to kill Calvin, the magistrate would properly have defended Calvin. But when Servetus fought with reasons and writings, he should have been repulsed with reasons and writings.

**From, 'De Haereticis' (1554)**

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 and were more cruelly treated than brigands and murderers? 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?

*(Hillar & Allen, 'Michael Servetus', pp. 219 & 217)*

The Unitarian Universalist historian, **Peter Hughes**, was one of the speakers at the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists commemorative Servetus conference in Geneva in October 2003. This is an extract from his paper, 'Servetus as Sacrifice'.

The fact that we can claim Servetus as a central figure in our tradition without reference to his theology further demonstrates one of our most basic principles: the commitment to freedom of belief and the rejection of any creedal test for inclusion in our denomination. We are reminded that there is no theological way to determine from the outside whether a person, past or present, really belongs within or without our denomination. In this way, as well as our rejection of Calvin's method of purifying the community by destroying heretics, the story helps us to define our identity.

The sacrifice of Servetus reminds us of the seriousness of our religious quest. If our own faith tradition is built on sacrifice, we must strive to be worthy inheritors of that which was born in ashes and blood. We must also remember that each person who joins a Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist church is choosing to take on not only the benefits that Servetus's sacrifice provides but a share in the responsibility for what happened to him.

*('Martyr Soul Remembered', pp. 94-95)*

Unitarian minister, **Celia Midgley**, wrote this poem for the ICUU service at the Servetus memorial at Champel, Geneva, on 27<sup>th</sup> October 2003, and read it there.

### **Remembering**

It is the decent thing we do now  
the proper rite for one who mattered  
whose death has touched us all.

Drawn by our common purpose  
we offer our shame and sorrow  
that death can not repair.  
And now it seems we come  
to kill again with kindness  
to make a healing here.

We tell once more the story  
we hear the cry, the pain.  
We will that we remember.

And all our deaths are shared now  
our lives that shout their love  
our hopes that wait in ashes.

*(‘Martyr Soul Remembered’, pp. 183-184)*

## **5. READINGS AND OTHER EXTRACTS FROM ‘THE RESTORATION OF CHRISTIANITY’**

*See separate file ‘Extracts from Servetus’. I have written to the publisher to ask permission to reproduce these.*

## **6. ASPECTS OF SERVETUS – SOME REFLECTIONS**

*Page references for Servetus quotations are, unless otherwise stated, from Hoffman and Hillar’s translation, ‘The Restoration of Christianity’.*

### **SERVETUS AND THE UNITARIAN TRADITION**

Michael Servetus didn’t found a church or a movement. He cannot be claimed as the sole rock upon which the Unitarian tradition was founded. He was disowned by one of the acknowledged founders of that tradition, Faustus Socinus, while another, Francis David, did much the same. Both of them based their theology more or less solely on the Bible. Servetus, on the other hand, while holding the Bible (which he had studied deeply and reverently) to be his principal authority, also drew on Classical philosophy, Jewish Rabbinical scholarship, Islam, and even Zoroastrianism. This is what Socinus and David found unacceptable. It doesn’t necessarily mean, though, that they owed nothing to him.

Speaking at the ICUU conference in Geneva to mark the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Servetus’s death, Dr. Elek Rezi, Deputy Bishop of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania and Dean of the Unitarian Theological Faculty at the Protestant Seminary in Cluj (Kolozsvár), stated:

“It is incontestable that David not only knew of, but thoroughly studied Servetus’s major works, and sympathised particularly with the ideas of ‘Christianismi Restitutio’.” (*A Martyr Soul Remembered*, p. 27)

Citing the Transylvanian scholar, Borbely Istvan, Rezi states that David incorporated “over 40% of Servetus’s book in his own, ‘De Regno Christi’, published in 1569. Elek Rezi’s own conclusion includes the statement, “...Servetus’s theological view motivated David to continue on his Reformation path.” (*A Martyr Soul Remembered*, pp. 27 & 28)

This suggests that while the development of Unitarianism in Poland – and in England too – may have owed little – directly – to Servetus, in Transylvania the debt was somewhat greater. And if David studied Servetus’s ‘Christianismi Restitutio’, what happened to the copy he used? It has been suggested that it is the same copy which, by a circuitous route, including a bookshop in London in 1665, came to rest in the National Library in Vienna, where it remains to this day. The other two surviving copies are in Edinburgh University Library and the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris.

The Francis David connection links Servetus directly with the living Unitarian tradition, but more specifically to that of Transylvania. We British Unitarians tend to trace our origins to other sources. Some were domestic – notably the Gloucester schoolmaster, John Biddle – but they also included Faustus Socinus and the ‘Racovian Catechism’ of Poland’s Minor Reformed Church. But principally, and ironically, our roots lie in Calvinism, albeit by way of its much-liberalised Arminian offshoot. This was increasingly adopted by English Presbyterians in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. On their way to full-blown Unitarianism, some of them opted for the theological halfway house of Arianism, a compromise that Servetus specifically rejected. For much of this period, though, they were commonly called ‘Socinians’!

And all this being so, why should we celebrate Servetus’s birth? Especially when it is often said that he wasn’t really a Unitarian at all! There are three major reasons, all connected with the principal theological and historical bases of Unitarianism.

Firstly, because the principal concern of Servetus’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. The arguments with which he did this may seem strange to us, but it was nevertheless a Unitarian theology in the true sense.

Secondly, because he was concerned to stress the full and true humanity of Jesus. Again, the way he did it may hardly accord with our understanding of what this means, and his theological arguments often remote seem from modern Unitarian ideas. Nevertheless, in his concern to preserve the true humanity of Jesus, to see him as truly our brother, Servetus was true to a basic Unitarian affirmation. He was, in fact, one of its very first proponents in the Reformation era.

Thirdly, we should celebrate him because he advocated religious toleration and abhorred the usual 16<sup>th</sup>-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.”

*(Letter quoted in, ‘Martyr Soul Remembered’, p. 203)*

On the Divine Unity, the true humanity of Jesus, and the principle of religious toleration, Servetus can be seen as a true forerunner of Unitarianism as we know it – and a very courageous one at that.

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!

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### **SERVETUS AND GOD – MODALISM AND PANENTHEISM**

Michael Servetus was scathing in his rejection of the 'orthodox' doctrine of the Trinity as held by both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches at the time. He was adamant in his affirmation of the Unity of God. But his theology was not that of the other Unitarian pioneers in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. So what did Servetus believe about God?

His concept of God is not always easy to grasp. I think it is fair to say, though, that it combined the ideas of modalism and panentheism (but not pantheism!). He was a modalist because he believed that, through successive ages, God has manifested himself in a sequence of modes or aspects, or dispositions, each with a specific purpose in the divine outworking. These modes – which include the Logos (or Word), the Elohim, the Christ, and the Spirit – are, effectively, different ways in which God acts at particular points in the achievement of his purpose. They do not, however, constitute distinct persons in the Trinitarian sense, and neither do they compromise in any way the essential Unity of God. Their apparent succession in time is just that – apparent! It is the result of our limited temporal perception as human beings. God, however, is not subject to time. From the divine perspective all these modes are eternally present as an undivided and undifferentiated Unity.

And Servetus also believed that not only do all things exist within God as this Divine Unity, but that God is fully present in all things throughout the universe. This is panentheism. Servetus believed that God breathes his Spirit into everything, including ourselves. So, as the whole universe partakes of the Divine Breath, then to that extent it is a part of God. He wrote:

"God's Spirit and the spirit of man are one spirit", and added, "Our own spirit itself is God." (p.282) Servetus believed that God constitutes the essence of everything in nature, making it what it is. He wrote: "Divinity in a stone is stone; in gold it is gold; in wood, wood, in accordance with its own forms." (p. 261)

"We are saying," Servetus states, "that God Himself is the essence of all things." And he continues:

"God is that which comprehends and contains all things. God Himself 'sustains us' and 'carries us' (Isa. 46 and 63). He 'makes all things alive' (1 Tim. 6). 'In Him we live, we are moved, we are (Acts 17). 'All things cohere in Him' (Col. 1). 'Everything is from Him, through Him and in Him.' All things are in Him; He gives being to things; and to every individual form He gives formal being. He contains the form of all things. He is, so to speak, the formal part of all things...He sustains all things essentially so that just as it exists *ex nihilo*, any given creation that is deprived of that sustaining help would return to nothing." (pp. 181-182)

And Servetus invokes a Jewish source to back his argument:

“The ancient Hebrews and philosophers taught this same thing. From the Hebrews the rabbi, Moses the Egyptian, cites this in Book I, *Perplexorum*...saying, ‘every being that exists is within the creator, and He is within all things...’ (p. 182)

And that is as clear a statement of panentheism as one is likely to find.

### **SERVETUS AND OTHER FAITHS**

Michael Servetus took an attitude to non-Christian faiths – or, at least, the Abrahamic ones – that was quite remarkable for his time. This was probably the result of several factors.

Having been born and brought up in Spain, he was well aware of the country’s strong Muslim and Jewish traditions, and of their cruel suppression – in the name of Christ – by the Roman Catholic Church, through its most notorious instrument, the Spanish Inquisition.

Servetus was a considerable biblical scholar and linguist. He also studied the Classical philosophers and was influenced by their thought, particularly that of Plato. But more unusually, he studied Jewish Rabbinical and Muslim writings, including the Qur’an, with a considerable degree of respect. And he found in these monotheistic faiths much to recommend them, in contrast to Trinitarian Christian theology, for which he developed a profound contempt.

He called the doctrine of the Trinity, “an illusion that is contingent on illusions’ (p.58) and declared that, “you can plainly see that the Trinity was unknown to the first Christians.” (p. 51) And he blamed the doctrine for the gulf that exists between Christians on the one hand and Jews and Muslims on the other. “Turks laugh at us”, he wrote, and declared: “Neither in the Talmud nor in the Qur’an are such horrifying blasphemies found.” (p.66)

Servetus quotes with approval the Muslim view of Jesus (as he saw it) as expressed in Qur’an, the authorship of which he attributes to Muhammad: “...he says that Christ was the greatest of the prophets...” (p. 49) Servetus agrees with the Muslims’ condemnation of Christianity’s departure from pure monotheism: “How wretchedly we are criticized by them!” (p. 48) he exclaims, and goes on to make a statement with disturbing relevance even today. Servetus states: “Because of the misguided teaching of the Trinitarians he [i.e. Muhammad] dissented from Christianity, which was truly an unfortunate tragedy for the world.” (p. 51)

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“They consider our testament to be schismatic because they see that we have completely retreated from the unity and simplicity of their God and that none of their own principal authorities ever contemplated such a thing.” (p. 48)

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“They make bodiless metaphysical invisible persons that are stupidly called persons. It would be a small abuse of language if they were not abusing God himself too, by splitting him up, tearing him apart, and cutting him to bits.” (p. 153)

When it came to theological argument, Servetus didn’t mince his words!



But although Michael Servetus took a surprisingly positive view of Judaism and Islam for the time in which he lived, he remained very much a Christian. He was convinced of the superiority of the Christian faith, as he understood it. He envisaged a restored Unitarian Christianity, into which Jews and Muslims would *want* to come. He didn't anticipate the sort of 'inter-faith' situation that we have now! He had his criticisms of Islam and Judaism, as he also had criticisms of other Christian 'heresies', including a non-Trinitarian one like Arianism, which was to become popular with some of our more recent forbears. Importantly, though, Servetus was reluctant to regard all non-Christians as somehow lost and destined to damnation, as the 'orthodox' Church taught in both its Catholic and Protestant forms.

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## **SERVETUS, SALVATION, AND THE SACRAMENTS**

Michael Servetus took a view of salvation that was at least potentially Universalist in the true theological sense. He disposed of the idea that all humanity is subject to damnation, writing: "Christ himself forgives everyone for Adam's original sin..." (p. 340) He enters no caveats to restrict the word "everyone". However, he then adds that, having been forgiven for Adam's sin, we remain responsible for our own sins. We must answer for them at the Last Judgement. Servetus writes: "everyone would be judged, not for Adam's deed, but for all their own deeds." (p. 340)

Importantly, Servetus also took the view that children – and even young people up to the age of twenty or more! – could not be held responsible for sin and were therefore not subject to judgement or damnation. This belief determined his doctrine of baptism, which he held was only appropriate for adults. Indeed, he was fiercely opposed to infant baptism, calling it, "a detestable abomination, a quenching of the Holy Spirit, a laying waste of the Church of God" (Hillar & Allen. *Michael Servetus*, p. 112), which led some to call him an Anabaptist, although this wasn't really the case. He held that the sacrament of baptism regenerated the soul and restored the relationship with God that our own sin (not Adam's!) has compromised. And the only other sacrament that Servetus recognised – communion – served the purpose of regularly renewing that relationship. The effectiveness of the two sacraments rests on Christ's resurrection and on the utterly transformed nature of his risen body and spirit. Servetus writes:

"...all the elements of his body and spirit were renewed, glorified, and made incorruptible through the power of resurrection. Through baptism and communion Christ imparts to us all these things, imparting himself entirely to us." (p. 261)

Of baptism specifically, Servetus writes: "In Christ's baptism his entire spirit is given to us..." And then: "Through this new spirit our very soul attains true immortality...and our spirit is made one with God." And on communion, he has this to say: "...in communion his entire flesh is given to us." It is important to stress what he meant by this. He writes:

"At the Lord's supper Christ's incorruptible flesh is itself joined to our new spirit, and this flesh is an incorruptible food of the 'inner incorruptible man'."

All this is "compacted into one element", which makes our "inner man...incorruptible and immortal." For both the "inner man" and the "total man", Servetus tells us, this means that death is, "rather a special type of rest and slumber", awaiting the final resurrection and entry to "paradise...and the kingdom of heaven." (p. 261)

For Servetus, the sacraments were about what happened internally and spiritually rather than what was going on externally and physically in any particular priestly ritual. As he puts it:

“True Christians act from an inner anointing and sanctification which happens in the spirit and by the spirit. Therefore we call the spirit holy and we are baptized in the name of the holy spirit...” (p. 276)

But if the sacraments are so important for Christian salvation, what is to be the fate of non-Christians and those who died before Christ’s coming? Here Servetus introduces an important concept, one that would later become a Unitarian watchword:

“...the spirit of divinity was from the beginning placed inside everyone...Now this spirit internally establishes a certain rule of conscience, which brings all people to salvation or damnation.” (p. 341)

Thus people of good conscience, although born before or beyond the Christian revelation, need have no fear of damnation. Servetus writes:

“...many among the Jews and Gentiles were found to be pious, their sins will be forgiven in the future judgement.” (p. 347)

And he even suggests that those who have needlessly and wrongly elaborated the Christian message might have rather more reason to worry! He writes: “Whoever has built something superfluous upon Christ’s foundation, will be punished in the fire of affliction...” (p. 347)

In the final analysis, though, everyone would benefit from Christ’s sacrifice:

“In his final resurrection he will free everyone from death and hell; and death and hell would be utterly destroyed...”

But in the meantime, the souls in Hell will be tormented by the consciousness of their *own* transgressions. Servetus writes: “The souls will be tortured with the pain of their biting conscience.” (p. 351)

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## **SERVETUS AND THE CIRCULATION OF THE BLOOD**

If Michael Servetus’s book, ‘Christianismi Restitutio’ (‘The Restoration of Christianity’), is known at all outside a specialised theological (mainly Unitarian) circle it is for the account of the pulmonary circulation of the blood that it contains. Published in 1553, it was the first such description to appear in Europe. Only that of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Arab anatomist, Ibn an-Nafis, is thought to pre-date it, although his description wasn’t published in printed form until 1924. But outside his native Spain, Servetus’s discovery is little known and rarely mentioned, even though it pre-dates William Harvey’s work by seventy-five years. Nevertheless, it is evidence of Servetus’s eminence as an anatomist and physician, and should surely place him in the front rank of European medical discovery. It was probably only the suppression of his book that has deprived Servetus of recognition.

But Servetus was writing a book of theology, so why should it include a medical treatise? Firstly, because Servetus saw the human body as an awe-inspiring, divine creation. He wrote: “The construction of the human being is a most amazing thing.” (p. 252)

Secondly, because, both physically and spiritual, the body, the intellect, and the soul are all evidence of God’s creative activity. Servetus writes:

“For God first lit the lamp within us and turned the shadows that had there been generated...into light.” (p. 249)

Interestingly, among the various biblical and Classical authorities he quotes to back his statement is Zoroaster, for whom light was a distinguishing divine quality, as it was for Servetus.

And thirdly, Servetus maintains that, “...the soul of all flesh is in the blood.” (p. 235).

And he makes the connection between breathing and the blood:

“For by God’s breath the gust of the heavenly spirit...has been infused through the mouth and nostrils into the heart and brain of Adam himself and into that of his children, and it has been joined in essence to that spiritual bloody material within; it has been made soul within his innards.” (pp. 255-6)

Servetus describes in detail how air – which he regards as, quite literally, the breath of God – enters the blood and is then transported by the pulmonary system – with the blood passing from the left to the right ventricles of the heart by way of the lungs, and not directly as was previously thought. But he doesn’t just see this in physical terms. It is a profoundly and fundamentally spiritual process. In one delightful sentence he writes: “...the choroids capillary arteries expand and draw in the air in order to aerate the soul.” (p. 250)

Servetus’s belief that it is in the act of breathing that the soul itself is received from God, and then renewed, led to some interesting conclusions about the point at which we gain our souls and so become individual human beings. He wrote:

“...the embryo does not have its own soul. The embryo is said to live with vegetal life before God breathes a soul into it.” (p.366)

And he didn’t see this as happening while the developing child remains in the womb:

“In the uterus the embryo is animated by the mother’s soul and heart. When is a man’s true soul breathed into him by God? When a man starts to breathe, at the moment of birth...” (p. 367)

“This is achieved”, writes Servetus, “through a great bit of artistry. For at the moment of birth...a soul arrives.” And he adds this remarkable comment: “It is not accurate to call what is in the womb a son because it is not actually a person.” (pp. 368-9).

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## **THE GENERATION OF CHRIST**

Michael Servetus’s beliefs regarding the birth of Christ were rooted in his beliefs about the body and the soul. He said that the body of Jesus was, like all our bodies, formed of earthly components in his mother’s womb. “The earth is everything’s mother”, he wrote, “and there exists in everything an earthly element deriving from the mother.” (p. 363) And he drew an analogy from nature, which he always saw as replete with the Divine:

“Plants sprout and grow in similarity to Christ. For example, just as the power of heavenly dew...by watering earthly matter, like a seed...causes it to sprout, so it happens even with Christ. Thus Mary’s womb became a garden whither descended the rising sun’s dew and caused Christ to sprout forth.” (p. 364)

Jesus the human being was thus conceived in the virgin’s womb by divine action analogous to, “the power of heavenly dew”, with God fulfilling the role of father. But this wasn’t what devolved divinity upon him. At the point of birth, this human body was composed, like all others, of earthly elements. But it received, at the same point,

that mode of Divinity, that disposition of God, which we call Christ. As Servetus puts it, "The very power of Divinity was given him by the Father." (p. 19) But this in no way compromised his true and full humanity, Servetus insists: "...he calls us brothers because he is a human being." (p. 19)

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## **CELEBRATING SERVETUS**

While aspects of Michael Servetus's Unitarian theology will strike chords with some 21<sup>st</sup>-century Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists, much, if not all, of it may seem obscure, alien and irrelevant to others. It isn't easy to think ourselves back into the worldview of an idiosyncratic Spanish theologian in the tumultuous years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But if the theology of Michael Servetus seems incomprehensible today, can there be any other reason to commemorate him? I think there is.

Servetus may have been, as his enemies portrayed him, a stubborn and cantankerous man, but, far more importantly, he was a man of conscience and of courage. He held strong religious beliefs that in the end, he was prepared to die for. That in itself may not have been remarkable at the time, when martyrdom was the fate of all too many. But what made Servetus more deserving of our recognition than some was this: that while, in the end, he was prepared to die for his faith, he was not prepared to kill for it. He thought it, "a serious matter" to kill someone simply because of their religious beliefs and opinions.

While he was almost too ready (for his own good!) to lock horns in theological debate and argument, and even though he could be very acerbic (to put it mildly!) in the expression of his views, he did not propose burning his opponents at the stake. They, whether Catholic or Protestant, took a less charitable view of him. The story of his arrest, imprisonment, trial and execution illustrates all too well the bigotry, fanaticism and intolerance of the times. But Michael Servetus's fate became something of a *cause celebre* and was a watershed in attitudes to religious tolerance.

## **SERVETUS AND THE UNITARIAN TRADITION**

Michael Servetus didn't found a church or a movement. He cannot be claimed as the sole rock upon which the Unitarian tradition was founded. He was disowned by one of the acknowledged founders of that tradition, Faustus Socinus, while another, Francis David, did much the same. Both of them based their theology more or less solely on the Bible. Servetus, on the other hand, while holding the Bible (which he had studied deeply and reverently) to be his principal authority, also drew on Classical philosophy, Jewish Rabbinical scholarship, Islam, and even Zoroastrianism. This is what Socinus and David found unacceptable. It doesn't necessarily mean, though, that they owed nothing to him.

The Francis David connection links Servetus directly with the living Unitarian tradition, but more specifically to that of Transylvania. We British Unitarians tend to trace our origins to other sources. Some were domestic – notably the Gloucester schoolmaster, John Biddle – but they also included Faustus Socinus and the 'Racovian Catechism' of Poland's Minor Reformed Church. But principally, and ironically, our roots lie in Calvinism, albeit by way of its much-liberalised Arminian offshoot. This was increasingly adopted by English Presbyterians in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. On their way to full-blown Unitarianism, some of them opted for the

theological halfway house of Arianism, a compromise that Servetus specifically rejected. For much of this period, though, they were commonly called 'Socinians'!

And all this being so, why should we celebrate Servetus's birth? Especially when it is often said that he wasn't really a Unitarian at all! There are three major reasons, all connected with the principal theological and historical bases of Unitarianism.

Firstly, because the principal concern of Servetus'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. The arguments with which he did this may seem strange to us, but it was nevertheless a Unitarian theology in the true sense.

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Thirdly, we should celebrate him because he advocated religious toleration and abhorred the usual 16<sup>th</sup>-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."

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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!

### **THE ROAD TO GENEVA**

Michael Servetus was born into an orthodox Roman Catholic family. 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 and influential 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, the young Servetus was developing some dangerously unorthodox ideas. The most likely source of 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. Another factor in his disillusion with the Roman Catholic Church was the coronation of Pope Clement VII in Bologna in 1529, which Servetus witnessed at first hand. He was horrified at what he saw, writing later in, 'De Trinitatis Erroribus':

"With these very eyes we have seen him [the Pope] borne in pomp on the necks of princes, making with his hand the sign of the cross, and adored in the open streets

by all the people on bended knee, so that those who were able to kiss his feet...counted themselves more fortunate than the rest, and declared they had obtained many indulgences, and that on this account the infernal pains would be remitted for many years. O vilest of all beasts, most brazen of harlots!"

Radicalised both by this and by his reading of the Bible, Servetus was set on his perilous path. He visited Protestant Reformers in Basel and Strasbourg, where the precocious young Spaniard received a cautious welcome. Already there was some unease about his ideas among Protestants as well as Catholics.

While still in his very early twenties he published his first two theological works, 'De Trinitatis Erroribus' – 'On the Errors of the Trinity' – in 1531, and, 'Dialogorum De Trinitate' – 'Dialogues on the Trinity' – in 1532. They were not well received! In very real fear for his life, Servetus was forced to live 'undercover' in France for twenty years, using the alias, Michel de Villeneuve.

Servetus /Villeneuve studied medicine in Paris, afterwards practicing as a physician and writing a book on the medicinal use of syrups ('Syruporum Universa Ratio', 1537). It may have been in Paris that he began to make those groundbreaking discoveries about the circulation of the blood for which he is particularly celebrated in Spain. He also studied astronomy and 'judicial' astrology, the two subjects being closely linked in those days. Servetus left Paris, living for some years in Lyons, Charlieu and finally Vienne. Besides practicing medicine, he worked as an editor, notably on an edition of Ptolemy's 'Geography', and, significantly, on a new edition of the Bible, known as the Pagnini Bible. His theological interest never waned. He very nearly met John Calvin when he was in Paris, and later corresponded with him. By the mid-1540s he was working on his great theological testament, 'Christianismi Restitutio' – 'The Restoration of Christianity'.

Calvin's suspicions about 'Michel de Villeneuve' had already been aroused by their correspondence, but with the appearance of 'Christianismi Restitutio' in 1553, Servetus's cover was blown. Both the Roman Catholic and Protestant authorities were on his trail, while very successfully suppressing publication of the book itself. Arrested by the Catholic Inquisition, Servetus escaped and fled to the Protestant stronghold of Geneva. But it proved no refuge. He was arrested, imprisoned and put on trial for heresy. In a unique piece of cooperation, the Roman Catholic Inquisition sent evidence to assist the Protestant John Calvin in the prosecution of Servetus. It was, though, 'Christianismi Restitutio', with its 'heretical' re-evaluation of Christian doctrine that was the main plank of the prosecution case. Duly convicted, Servetus was sentenced to death by burning. The sentence was carried out at Champel, outside the walls of Geneva on 27<sup>th</sup> October 1553.

Reputedly, Servetus's last words were, "O Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have pity on me." Calvin's mentor and ally in Geneva, Guillaume Farel, remarked on hearing this, that if Servetus had only shifted an adjective and called Jesus, "the Eternal Son", his life might have

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been saved. But for Servetus that would have been to compromise his conscience, something that he was not prepared to do, at any price.

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