

The Servetus Controversy



The execution of Servetus in Geneva has long caused discussion among scholars and lay people alike.

Assessments range from an awareness of historical circumstances that made it difficult for the Genevans to come to a different verdict, to criticism and outrage at John Calvin for his perceived role in Servetus' death.

The penal death of Servetus was an historical event resulting from deeply-held theological, social, and political views which to 21 st century sensibilities may seem extreme or at best strange.

It is true that Calvin and his fellow pastors in Geneva were involved in the death of Servetus. However, it would be difficult to find any church leader in the 16 th century who advocated a more gentle approach. Luther called for attacks on German peasants and wrote an angry tract against the Jews, called 'On the Jews and their Lies'. Zwingli, the Reformer of Zurich, supported the execution by drowning of the Anabaptist leader, Felix Manz. Sir Thomas More, England 's Catholic Lord Chancellor, presided over the execution of those he viewed as "heretics" in England during the reign of Henry the VIII. Each country of Europe in the sixteenth century felt that defending its religious views involved taking strong measures against those who disagreed. Toleration and acceptance of doctrinal differences were simply not sixteenth-century concepts.

Even a cursory reading of Servetus indicates that he was a "Renaissance man" of many interests. Also, it is very evident that he did not accept orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, or the writings of John Calvin. According to Sergio Opi, " Servetus studied the Holy Scriptures, and as he stated in this first treatise, he did not find any reference to the word Trinity. Hence, he questioned the validity of one of the fundamental dogmas of Christianity: " We must not impose as truths - contended Servetus - concepts over which there are doubts ". According to Servetus, in God there is one single person. Servetus was clearly opposed to the splitting up of the divine essence and contented that the persons of the Trinity are rather "forms" that God has chosen to manifest itself. According to Servetus, Christ was made a man by God, and his human nature

prevents him from being God and participating in the eternity nature of God. As a result, God was eternal, but Jesus Christ (the Son), since he was begot by the Father, was not eternal .”

This unorthodox interpretation of the dogma of Trinity led to a common desire on the part of both Roman Catholics and Protestants alike to jail Servetus, to put him to death, and to destroy his writings.

The following material provides an outline of events leading up to Servetus' death, and a bibliography covering the range of views concerning the Calvin-Servetus affair. All the materials, pro or con, are collected in the H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies and may be used by any interested person.

Outline of Servetus' Life

1509/1511

born in Villanueva , Spain

1530

lived in Basel , stayed 10 months, visited Johannes Oecolampadius - the Basel Reformer - to whom he expressed his views on the Trinity and who counseled Servetus to change his ideas

1531

published *De Trinitatis Erroribus* (*Concerning Trinitarian Errors*)

1532

published pamphlet *Dialogorum de Trinitate libri duo* (*Two Books of Dialogue Concerning the Trinity*)

May 1532



above: Servetus burning at the stake
by Eduourd Elzingre (1909)

Inquisition at Zaragoza , Spain takes action against him

June 1532

decree by the Inquisition for his apprehension is issued at Toulouse

1534

in Paris studying medicine and working as professor of mathematics; failed to meet with the young John Calvin to debate theological issues



above: silver medal from Spain commemorating Michael Servetus' scientific discovery of pulmonary circulation (1969)

1536-1538

graduates from the University of Paris after studying geography and medicine

1540

may have earned medical degree from University of Montpellier

1541-1545

edited Pagnini Bible in seven volumes

1546-1547

correspondence with Calvin; manuscript of *Christianismi Resitutio* (*The*

1546-1548

Restitution of Christianity) sent to Calvin; Calvin corresponded with Farel, Calvin's long time friend, advisor, and first Reformer in Geneva concerning Servetus' writings

January 3, 1553

Christianismi Restitutio printed in Lyon ;

February 26, 1553

Through a letter written by the Genevan Guillaume de Trie, a cousin to the printer in Lyon, Servetus is exposed in Vienne, a French city near Lyon ,

March 15-17, 1553

interrogated in Vienne

April 4, 1553

imprisoned in Vienne

April 7, 1553

escapes from prison in Vienne

June 17, 1553

condemned to death (in absentia) in Vienne by the French Catholic Inquisition

August 13, 1553

on route to Italy he lodged overnight in Geneva but was recognized and at Calvin's request was imprisoned by the city magistrates

October 26, 1553

condemned to death by Council of Geneva

October 27, 1553

informed about condemnation and burned at the stake

December 23, 1553

posthumous condemnation of Servetus by the ecclesiastical court and Archbishop of Vienne

February 1554

publication of Calvin's book, *Defensio Orthodoxae Fidei (Defense of the True Faith)*

Further Reading

Books

Bainton, Roland H. *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus (1511-1553)*.

Boston : Beacon Press, 1953.

Friedman, Jerome. *Michael Servetus: a Case Study in Total Heresy* . Geneva : Droz, 1978.

Fulton, John F. *Michael Servetus: Humanist and Martyr* (New York : Herbert Reichner, 1953.

Goldstone, Lawrence and Nancy. *Out of the Flames* . New York : Broadway Books, 2002.

Hillar, Marian. *The Case of Michael Servetus (1511-1553): the Turning Point in the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience*. Lewisburg: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997 .

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Servetus, Michael. *Christianismi Restitutio and Other Writings* . Birmingham : The Classics of Medicine Library, 1989.

_____. *The Two Treatises of Servetus on the Trinity* . Cambridge , Harvard University Press, 1932.

Articles

Kayayan, Eric. "The Case of Michel Servetus." *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 8, no. 2 (1992): 117-46.

Kingdon, Robert. "Social Control and Political Control in Calvin's Geneva ." In *Die Reformation in Deutschland und Europa: Interpretationen und Debatten* , edited by Hans R. Guggisberg, 521-32. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993.

Pettegree, Andrew. "Michael Servetus and the Limits of Tolerance." *History Today* 40 (1990): 40-45.

Web

<http://www.miguelservet.org/servetus/works.htm#trinitatis>