

### **Michael Servetus (1511-1553)**

Michael Servetus was born in Villanueva in Spain in 1511. He was the son of a local judge. He lived at a time when there was unrest in the established Church, and in a period when everyone was questioning the nature of Christianity. In 1517, when Servetus was six years old, Martin Luther started his revolt against the Roman Catholic Church. This resulted in his being excommunicated, and he became a leader of the new reformed "protestant" religion. This movement, known today as the Reformation, spread like wild fire, and even those who did not agree with Luther were forced to take notice of him. As well as this conflict, there was another closer to home: although the Muslims and the Christians in Spain had enjoyed better relations in the past, the results of the Crusades in the East caused the Christians to direct their anger against the Muslims in Spain. The organisation known as the Spanish Inquisition set about converting all people who were not Christian to Roman Catholicism. Any laxity in observing the outward rites of the Church resulted in severe punishment, if not death.

As he grew older and more informed, the young Servetus was appalled by the shedding of so much blood. There was a large settlement of Muslims and Jews in the country, and they were spared the sword only if they publicly confessed their faith to be that of the Roman Catholics and affirmed the formula of the Trinity. Imagine his excitement when, upon examining the Bible more closely, he found that the doctrine of Trinity was nowhere a part of its teaching. He further discovered that the Bible did not always support what was being taught by the Church. He was only twenty years

old when he decided to tell the world the truth as he had found it, for it followed from this discovery that if the Christians accepted that there was only One God, then all cause for strife between the Christians and the Muslims would be ended, and both communities could live together in peace. This sensitive but inexperienced youth, his imagination fired with enthusiasm, felt that this end would most easily be achieved with the help of the leaders of the Reformation, who had, after all, already broken away from the Catholic Church. The new Protestant Churches would become unitarian, and with their help the Christians, the Muslims and the Jews would be able to live together in peace. A world of toleration would become a possibility, based on One God, the "Father" of the family of mankind.

Servetus was too young to realise that the minds of the leaders of the Reformation were still trapped in the same false metaphysics. He was to find that both Luther and Calvin would have nothing to do with his belief in the Unity of God. They feared that the Reformation would go too far. A number of ceremonies of the Catholic Church were abolished, but they were afraid to rediscover the original teaching of Jesus, since this would have added to their difficulties and entailed a diminishing of their own power and reputation. Perhaps they were unaware of how far the practises of the Roman Catholics had deviated from the life which Jesus lived. Certainly, they took great pains to contain the reformed religion within the frame-work of Catholic orthodoxy. Their quarrel was not so much with the theology of Rome as with its organisation, and particularly over the question as to who should rule the Church. The beliefs of Servetus posed a threat to both of these organisations, and so, ironically, his appeal to the Reformists only caused them to join forces with the Catholic Church in order to protect their common interest. None of this was fully grasped by the young Servetus.

He had every hope in the leaders of the Reformation, for he was convinced that Roman Catholicism was not the religion of Jesus. His studies had shattered his belief in the doctrine of Trinity and resulted in his believing that there was One God and that Jesus was one of His prophets. His con-



viction had been strengthened by his witnessing of the coronation of Charles V of Spain by the Pope. In 1527, Charles V invaded and sacked Rome. At first, he imprisoned the Pope, but then realised the expediency of having the Pope as an ally. A captive Pope would hardly influence the people in the way he wanted, so he restored some measure of freedom to him. To demonstrate the good terms they were on, he decided to have a coronation at the hands of the Pope. Strictly speaking, it was not necessary. It was like having a church wedding after a civil ceremony. The king's predecessors had discontinued this practise, but he felt that he was now powerful enough, and the Pope weak enough, to revive it. The ceremony was not held in Rome, but in Bologna, since, according to the popular belief, "where the Pope is, there is Rome." Servetus witnessed the gorgeous spectacle and it filled him with revulsion for the Catholic Church. Describing the event, he wrote:

With these very eyes I saw him (the Pope) bourne with pomp on the shoulders of princes, making with his hand the sign of the cross, and adored in the open streets by all the people kneeling to such a point that those who were able to kiss his feet or slippers counted themselves more fortunate than the rest and declared that they had obtained many indulgences, and that on this account the infernal pains would be remitted for many years. Oh vilest of all beasts, most brazen of harlots.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Servetus's hopes were directed towards the leaders of the Reformation. He felt sure that if he could bring the error of the doctrine of the Trinity to their notice, then they would abandon their belief in this dogma. This misconception was to cost him his life. He left Spain and resided in Toulouse where he studied medicine and eventually took his doctor's degree in 1534. In the years that followed, he soon became a working physician, but, during all this time, his interest was directed towards re-establishing pure Christianity. He did not stay long at any one place, but travelled far and wide in search of people who were open-minded enough to listen to what he was sure was the true Christianity as taught by Jesus.



He went to Basle to meet the then famous Oecolampadius, who was one of the leaders of the Reformation. He had several meetings with him and the talk mainly centered on the two natures of Christ. Servetus denied the belief that Jesus pre-existed the creation of the world. He pointed out that the Jewish prophets always spoke of the "Son of God" in the future tense. However, he found that his views were not acceptable to the Protestants in Switzerland, and he left Basle in 1530. This was a great shock to him, since he had hoped that, unlike Catholic France, the Protestants would give a patient ear to what he had to say about Jesus and his teaching. He went to Strasbourg only to find that he could not earn a living there. Due to his ignorance of German, he was unable to practice medicine, and so he was forced to go to Lyons. Servetus also conducted a lengthy correspondence with Calvin throughout this period after his departure from Spain, but without any favourable response from Calvin, who was not altogether interested in trying to embody the teaching of Jesus, but who did want to remain leader of his movement.

Since all his attempts to influence people by personal contact had failed, Servetus printed his views in a book which he called *The Errors of Trinity*. It was published in 1531. In the same year, he published another book called *Two Dialogues on Trinity*. The two books took the whole of Europe by storm. No one had ever written such a daring book within living memory. The result was that the Church hounded Servetus from one place to another. Servetus was forced to change his name, but not his views. From 1532 up until his death, he lived under an assumed name. Servetus still appeared to have a childlike faith in Calvin, who, after reading the books, developed a deep dislike for this presumptuous young man who dared teach him theology. Servetus continued to write to Calvin and the leader's anger increased when he found that Servetus refused to accept his views. The leaders of the Protestant movement feared that it might suffer a set-back if the views of this young enthusiast became known to the people. The reformers also feared that persecution by the Catholic Church might increase if the Protestant doctrine deviated too far from the Catholic doctrine.



Thus, Servetus, instead of converting the Protestants to his views, forced them to embrace the dogma of Trinity even more zealously. Luther, for instance, publicly condemned him in 1539.

Throughout this time, Servetus continued to practice as a doctor, and became a very popular physician. In spite of the fact that a doctor's profession is very time-consuming, Servetus found time to supervise the printing of a Bible. It was published in 1540. Servetus wrote a preface to it in which he questioned whether a text of Scripture could have more than one meaning. Calvin wrote and replied in the affirmative, but Servetus disagreed with him. Today the Calvinist Church accepts the very principle of interpretation which Calvin alleged was one of the greatest offences of Servetus against orthodoxy. Servetus stated that he was following the views held by the early apostles who belonged to the Antiochene school of Christianity.

It is refreshing to discover that at the height of this bitter controversy, Servetus found refuge and peace in the house of his old friend, Peter Palmier, who was then the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Vienna. He lived there for thirteen years, enjoying the freedom to practice medicine, and he became quite renowned as a physician. He was one of the first people in Europe to write about the principle of the circulation of the blood. He also wrote a book on geography. In spite of his literary attainments, the issues facing Christianity always held the centre of his attention. He continued to write to Calvin, still hoping to win him over to his views, but Calvin firmly rejected the beliefs expressed in his letters. Servetus refused to accept the *obiter dicta* of Calvin. Calvin, who was at that time recognised as the foremost thinker of the Protestant religion, felt he was justified in expressing annoyance with Servetus for daring to challenge his rulings in matters of religion. Servetus refused to accept Calvin as an indisputable authority on religion. Calvin wrote back in anger and Servetus replied in turn with sarcasm. Servetus then wrote another book called *The Restoration of Christianity*, and sent an advance copy of the manuscript to Calvin. When the book was published, it was found to have seven chapters, the first and last of which were devoted entirely to the doctrines of Christ-



ianity. The fifth chapter contained copies of thirty letters which had passed between Servetus and Calvin. It exposed the fact that, whatever merits Calvin might possess, he lacked what is known as Christian meekness. The book resulted in Servetus being condemned yet again, both by the Catholic and Protestant Churches. They united in their efforts to have the book completely destroyed, and were so thorough that not more than two copies are known to exist today. A facsimile of the book was published in 1791, but copies of this book were also destroyed. In a letter written in 1546, Calvin threatened Servetus, saying that if he ever came to Geneva he would not allow him to escape with his life. Servetus did not seem to believe him, but Calvin was as good as his word. When Servetus later came to Geneva and went to see him, still convinced that a meeting of minds was possible, Calvin had him arrested by the Roman Catholics and thrown into prison on a charge of heresy.

Servetus had become so popular as a physician that he succeeded in escaping from the prison with the help of some of his former patients. He decided to go to Naples. His route lay through the city of Geneva. He thought he had disguised himself sufficiently to escape detection, but he was wrong. While passing through the city, he was recognised and arrested once more. This time he did not escape. At his trial, he was found guilty of heresy. Some of the judgement ran as follows:

Servetus confesses that in his book he called believers in the Trinity, Trinitarians and Atheists. He called this Trinity a diabolical monster with three heads. . . He called the infant baptism an invention of the devil and sorcery. . . This entails the murder and ruin of many souls. Moreover, he wrote a letter to one of the ministers in which, along with other and numerous blasphemies, he declared our evangelical religion to be without faith and without God, and that in place of God we have a three-headed Cerberus. Addressing Servetus, the Court says that you had neither shame nor horror of setting yourself against the Divine Majesty of the Holy Trinity, and so you have obstinately tried to infect the world with your stinking heretical poison. . . For these and other reasons desiring to purge the



Church of God of such infection and cut off the rotten member. . . we now, in writing, give final sentence and condemn you, Michael Servetus, to be bound and taken to the Chapel and there attached to a stake and burned with your book to ashes. And so you shall finish your days and give example to others who would commit the like.<sup>2</sup>

On the 26th of October, 1553, Servetus was fastened to the trunk of a tree fixed in the earth, his feet just touching the ground. A crown of straw and leaves sprinkled over with brimstone was placed on his head. Bundles of wood intermingled with green oaken faggots still in leaf were piled around his legs. His body was then bound to the stake with an iron chain and a course twisted rope thrown around his neck. The wood was then lit. The fire tormented him, but did not burn him severely. Seeing this, a few onlookers felt compassion for him and added more fuel in order to end his misery. According to one eye-witness, Servetus was writhing for about two hours before he died. A copy of *The Errors of Trinity* had been tied to his waist before the wood was lit. It is said that the book was rescued by someone, and that the half-burnt book still exists. Celsus relates that the constancy of Servetus in the midst of the fire induced many to go over to his beliefs. Calvin made it an express subject of complaint that there were so many people who cherished and revered his memory. As Castillo, a follower of Servetus, said: "To burn a man is not to prove a doctrine."<sup>3</sup> In later years, the people of Geneva were to remember him by erecting a statue, not to Calvin, but to the man he was responsible for burning alive.

Cowper was moved to write these lines:

They lived unknown  
Till persecution dragged them into fame  
And chased them up to heaven. Their ashes flew  
No marble tells us whither. With their names  
No bard embalms and sanctifies his song.  
And history so warm on meaner themes  
Is cold on this.<sup>4</sup>



Servetus's death was by no means an isolated incident. This kind of thing was happening throughout Europe at this time, as the following passage from Motley's *Rise of the Dutch Republic* indicates:

Upon the 15th of February 1568, a sentence of the Holy Office condemned all the inhabitants of the Netherlands to death as heretics. From this universal doom only a few persons, especially named, were excepted. A proclamation of King Philip II of Spain, dated ten days later, confirmed this decree of the Inquisition, and ordered it to be carried into instant execution. . . Three millions of people, men, women and children, were sentenced to the scaffold in three lines. Under the new decree, the executions certainly did not slacken. Men in the highest and the humblest positions were daily and hourly dragged to the stake. Alva, in a single letter to Philip II, coolly estimates the number of executions which were to take place immediately after the expiration of Holy Week at "eight hundred heads."<sup>5</sup>

A few excerpts from *The Errors of Trinity*, which caused such violent actions, follow. Servetus writes:

The philosophers have invented a third separate being truly and really distinct from the other two, which they call the third Person, or the Holy Spirit, and thus they have contrived an imaginary Trinity, three beings in one nature. But in reality three Gods, or one threefold God, are foisted upon us under the pretence, and in the name of Unity. . . For with them it is very easy, taking the words in their strict sense, for three beings to exist, which they say and yet strictly, simply, and really, so different or distinct yet one is born of another, and one is breathed out of the others, and yet all these three are shut up in one jar. Since I am unwilling to mis-use the word Persons, I shall call them the first being, the second being, and the third being, for in the Scripture I find no other name for them. . . Admitting therefore these three, which after their fashion they call Persons, they freely admit a plurality of beings, a plurality of entities, a plurality of Essences, a plurality of substances, and taking the word God strictly, they will have a plurality of Gods.



He continues:

If this is so, then why the Tritorites are blamed, who say that there are three Gods, for they also contrive three Gods or one threefold one. These threefold Gods of theirs form one composite substance. And although some will not use the word implying that the three have been put together, yet they do use a word that they are constituted together, and that God is constituted out of three beings. It is clear therefore that they are Tritorites and we have a threefold God. We have become Atheists, men without any God. For as soon as we try to think about God, we are turned aside to three phantoms, so that no kind of unity remains in our conception. What else is being without God but being unable to think about God, when there is always present to our understanding a haunting kind of confusion of three beings, by which we are forever deluded into supposing that we are thinking about God. . . They seem to be living in another world while they dream of such things for the kingdom of heaven knows none of this nonsense and it is in another way unknown to them, that Scripture speaks of the Holy Spirit.

He adds:

How much this tradition of the Trinity has alas, alas! been the laughing stock of Mohammedons only God knows. The Jews also shrink from giving adherence to this fancy of ours, and laugh at our foolishness about the Trinity, and on account of its blasphemies, they do not believe that this is the Messiah promised in their Law. And not only the Mohammedons and the Hebrews, but the very beasts of the field, would make fun of us, did they grasp our fantastic notion, for all the workers of the Lord bless the One God. . . This most burning plague, therefore, was added and superimposed, as it were, on the new gods which have recently come, which our fathers did not worship. And this plague of philosophy was brought upon us by the Greeks, for they above all men are most given to philosophy; and we, hanging upon their lips, have become philosophers, and they never understood the passages of the Scriptures which they adduced with regard to this matter.



Servetus also stressed what he believed to be the true nature of Jesus:

Some are scandalised at my calling Christ the prophet, because they happen not themselves to apply to him the epithet, they fancy that all who do so are chargeable with Judaism and Mohametism, regardless of the fact that the Scriptures and ancient writers call him the prophet.<sup>6</sup>

Michael Servetus was one of the most outspoken critics of the established Church of his time. It earned him the singular distinction of being burnt to death by the Catholics with the aid of the Protestants. He combined within himself all that was best in the Renaissance and the Reformation, and came near to fulfilling the ideal of his age which was to produce a "universal man" with "pansophic" knowledge. He was proficient in medicine, geography, Biblical scholarship and theology. The diversity of his learning gave him a breadth of vision which was denied to men who were less educated than he. Perhaps the most significant part of his life was his clash with Calvin. It was certainly a personal conflict, but it was more than that. It was a rejection of the Reformation which was prepared to alter the form and not the content of a decadent Church. It cost him his life, but although Servetus is dead, his belief in the Divine Unity still lives. He is still regarded by many as "the founder of modern Unitarianism."

Not everyone who shared the beliefs of Servetus also shared his fate, as is shown by the following letter by Adam Neuser, who was his contemporary. It was addressed to the leader of the Muslims in Constantinople, Emperor Selim II. It is included in "Antiquities Palatinae" which is now in the Archives at Heidelberg.

I, Adam Neuser, a Christian born in Germany and advanced to the dignity of Preacher to the people in Heidelberg, a city where the most learned men at this day in Germany are to be found, do fly for refuge to your Majesty with a profound submission conjuring you for the love of God and your Prophet, on whom be the peace of God, to receive me into the number of your subjects and those of your people that believe in God. For by the grace of the Omnipotent God, I see, I know, and I believe with my whole heart that your Doctrine and your Religion are pure,



clear, and acceptable to God. I am firmly persuaded that my Retreat from among the idolatrous Christians will engage many persons of Consideration to embrace your Belief and your Religion, especially since many of the most learned and most considerable amongst them are herein of the same sentiments with me as I shall inform your Majesty by word of mouth. As to what concerns myself I am certainly one of those of whom it is said in the thirteenth chapter of the Al Coran: The Christians show us more good will than the Jews; and when their Priests and Bishops, provided they are not imprudent and opinionated, understand the commandments which the Prophet of God gave, and thereby acknowledge the truth, they say with tears in their eyes, O God! We hope from our Hearts that since we believe the same things that the good people do, Thou wilt also make us enter into the communion: For why should not we believe in God and in Him who is manifested to us by the Truth?

Certainly, O Emperor! I am one of those that read the Al Coran with joy. I am one of those that desire to be of your People and I give testimony before God that the Doctrine of your Prophet, upon whom be the peace of God, is of undoubted Truth. For this reason I most humbly supplicate your Majesty for the love of God and of your Prophet to be graciously pleased to hear me and know after what manner the God of Mercy hath revealed this Truth to me.

But first of all your Majesty ought to be entirely persuaded that I have not recourse to your protection as some Christians are accustomed, who because of their crimes, thefts, murders, or adultries, cannot live with safety among the people of their own Religion. For I had resolved above a year ago to fly for Refuge to you, and was advanced in my way as far as Presburg but not understanding the Hungarian language I could go no further and against my will was constrained to return to my country which I should not have ventured to do if I had fled for any crime. Besides nothing constrains me to embrace your Religion, for who could force me to it being unknown to your people, and at so great a distance from them?

So your Majesty ought not to place me in the number of those Christians who being conquered and made prisoners by your subjects embrace your Religion but not with good will and who so soon as they find occasion run away



and renounce the true faith. Wherefore I again supplicate your Majesty to lend attention to what I am going to say and to be informed of the true course of my retreat to your Dominion.

Being promoted to the dignity of Preacher in the famous University of Heidelberg by the Elector Palatine who next to the Emperor is the most powerful prince in Germany, I began to weigh maturely within myself the divers dissensions and divisions of our Christian religion: for so many persons as there are amongst us there are so many opinions and sentiments. I began with abstracting from all the Doctors and Interpreters of the Scriptures who have wrote and taught since the days of the Prophet Jesus Christ. I tied myself only to the commandments of Moses and to the Gospel. Then I called upon God inwardly with a most religious application and prayed him to shew me the right way that I may not be in the danger to mislead myself and my hearers. Then it pleased God to reveal to me the "Articles of the Invocation of the One Only God", upon which Article I composed a book in which I prove that the Doctrine of Jesus Christ did not consist in asserting that he was himself a God as the Christians falsely allege: but that there is only one God who has no son consubstantial with him. I dedicated this book to your Majesty and I am very sure that the most able men amongst the Christians are not capable of refuting it. And wherefore indeed should I associate to God another God like unto him? Moses had forbid it and Jesus Christ never taught it. Afterwards fortifying myself from day to day by the grace of God, and understanding that the Christians abuse all the benefits of Jesus Christ as formerly the Jews abused the brazen serpent . . . I concluded that nothing pure is to be found amongst the Christians and that all they have is falsified. For they have perverted by their false interpretations almost all the writing of Moses and the Gospel which I have shewn in a book wrote with my own hand and which I shall present to your Majesty. When I say that the Christians have falsified and corrupted the commandments of Moses and the Gospel I mean only the words and the sense. For the doctrine of Moses, of Jesus and of Mahomet agree in everything and are not contrary to anything . . . the Al Coran gives a very advantageous testimony to Moses and Jesus Christ. But it insists principally upon the Christians cor-



rupting the commandments of Moses and the Gospel of Jesus Christ by their false interpretations. Indeed if the Word of God was faithfully interpreted there would be no difference amongst the Jews, Christians and Turks. Thus what the Al Coran so often repeats is true. The doctrine of Mahomet destroys all the false interpretations of the Scriptures and teaches the true sense of the Word of God . . .

After that by the grace of God I understood there was but one only God, that I had observed that the doctrine of Jesus Christ was not taught as it ought to have been, that all the ceremonies of the Christians were very much different from their first institutions. I began to think I was the only man of my opinion in the World. I had not seen Al Coran and among us Christians there was care taken to spread in all parts such infamous and scandalous reports against everything that concerns the doctrines of Mahomet that the poor people who are made to believe things as so many truths are seized with horror and run out of themselves at the very name of Al Coran. Nevertheless by the effect of Divine Providence that book fell into my hands for which I give thanks to God. To God I say who knows that in my prayers I invoke him for your Majesty and for all those that belong to you. I sought all effects of ways to impart the knowledge of these truths to my Auditors and in case they would not receive this doctrine I resolved to ask leave of the Electors to abandon my charge and retire to you. I began to attack by way of dispute in all the churches and in the schools some points of our doctrine and obtained what I wished: For I brought the matter to such a point that it was known to all the States of the Empire and I drew several learned men to my side. The Elector (fearing an invasion from the Emperor Maximillian) . . . deposed me . . .<sup>7</sup>

This letter fell into the hands of Emperor Maximillian. Neuser was arrested along with his friends who included two men called Sylvan and Mathias Vehe. They were thrown into prison. On the 15th of July 1570 Neuser escaped only to be retaken. He escaped a second time but was again arrested. Their trial continued for two years. It was decided to cut off the head of Sylvan. At this point, Neuser again escaped. This time he reached Constantinople and embraced Islam.



- 1) *The Hunted Heretic*, R.H. Bainton.
- 2) *A History of Unitarianism*, E.M. Wilbur.
- 3) *Challenge of a Liberal Faith*, G.N. Marshall.
- 4) *Anti-trinitarian Biographies*, A. Wallace.
- 5) *Rise of the Dutch Republic*, Motley.
- 6) *The Epic of Unitarianism*, D.B. Parke, pp. 5-6.
- 7) *Treatises Concerning the Mohametons*, A. Reland, pp. 215-223.