

BACK FROM THE ASHES

by Jaume de Marcos

2003 marks the 450th anniversary of Michael Servetus's death at the stake. In the morning of October 27th, Servetus was burned alive with copies of his last book, *Christianismi Restitutio* (Restitution of Christianity), at his feet, a heretical book for Catholics and Protestants alike, that has become one of the rarest and most condemned documents in Christian literature, and that only in recent years has been recovered with a full translation into Spanish and partial translations into English, German, and other modern languages.

The Calvinist authorities in Geneva had ordered that the heretic should be burned with unseasoned logs, to give the victim more time to think twice and beg for forgiveness and perhaps thus save his life. For those like Servetus who were faithful first to the integrity of their own mind and conscience and to the honesty of their opinions, this only meant a much longer and more painful agony. Probably Servetus could recall quite a few memories of his short but eventful life.

Now it has been firmly established by scholars that Miguel Serveto y Revés, a.k.a. Michael Servetus (his name in Latinized form), or "Michel de Villeneuve" or Villanovanus (his assumed name during his years in hiding in France) was born, most probably in 1511, in a small village in northern Aragon, Villanueva de Sigena, close to Catalonia to the east and to the plain and dry wasteland known as Los Monegros to the south. Many historians, including Unitarian E. M. Wilbur, believed that he was born in Tudela, in the former kingdom of Navarre, about 200 km. from Villanueva, even though both his ancestors and his descendants lived in Villanueva, and they had a family house there. Servetus himself is the cause of such confusion, because he declared to have been born in Navarre as part of his disguise as "Michel de Villeneuve". He probably wanted to remove any hint that would make him an easy target for the Inquisition, and being born in Navarre marked also a closer link with the kingdom of France because of dynastic and historical links between those two countries in the past (Navarre had been absorbed in the newly constituted kingdom of Spain in 1512, one year after Servetus's birth). But during the trial in Geneva, Servetus had nothing to hide anymore, and then it was clearly stated in the proceedings that his birthplace was Villanueva of Aragon.

Another common mistake about Servetus is to link him with Jewish ancestors. At that time any religion other than Catholic Christianity was forbidden and persecuted in Spain as a part of the Catholic Kings' policy to unify the population of

the old Medieval kingdoms that had quarreled for centuries in the Iberian peninsula. It was only a few years before that the last Moorish Spanish kingdom of Granada had been finally conquered in 1492. The existing Muslim and Jewish populations were asked to convert to Christianity or go to exile. Thus many converted officially, but kept their beliefs and religious practices in hiding. However, the Serveto-Revés family made a point that they were "old Christians", i.e. with no ancestors or links with Jewish or Muslim families, and his father was proud of holding a public office and a title of minor nobility that would never have been given to a convert.

Michael spent his childhood and early teenage years in the small village of Villanueva, but his father, a notary public who worked for the then very important monastery of Sigena, was aware of the intellectual brightness of his eldest son and sent him to study to Barcelona. There he met Juan de Quintana, an important friar and scholar, very respected in the royal court of Spain. De Quintana quickly noticed the extraordinary qualities of the young student and soon became his tutor, and took him to Bologna to attend the coronation of the young Spanish king, Charles, as the new Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Servetus, who had probably been already in touch with the works of the early leaders of the Reformation, was outraged by the shameless display of riches and pomp of the Pope and his entourage. It was no surprise, thus, that he later moved to the freest cities in Europe, where most of the leading humanists and religious free thinkers were living and writing their claims for greater purity in the Christian Church and a return to the evangelical values: Basel and later Strasbourg. However, even radical reformers such as Oecolampadius felt that that young Spaniard was going too far in his theological speculations.

In 1531, when he was scarcely 20 years old, Servetus wrote the first of his masterpieces: *De Trinitatis Erroribus* (On the Errors About the Trinity). He carefully and precisely explained his interpretation of the Scriptures and the nature of Christ, showing a surprisingly vast knowledge of the Scriptures, Greek and Hebrew for a man of his age and with no formal theological studies. He also put under scrutiny the holiest of all dogmas of the Christian Church, the Trinity, i.e. that God is a single entity in three Persons of equal substance and importance, and that the second Person miraculously incarnated in the man Jesus of Nazareth to fulfill God's plan of salvation for humankind and redeem their sins.

It has been said that Servetus was not really a Unitarian, but rather some "unorthodox Trinitarian". It is difficult to say nowadays what is, theologically, a Unitarian, because the theologies of Socinus, David, Channing and Parker (not to speak about modern Unitarianism with the enormous influence of Humanism and

other religious traditions outside Christianity) vary widely from each other. But also the theology described by Servetus cannot be properly called "trinitarian", no matter how far from the orthodox definition of the dogma may seem to be, because the "three Persons in one God" concept is considered by Servetus a gross misinterpretation of Scripture that "by turning to three ghosts, make people turn away from the One true God" (*DeTrErr*, Book I). Servetus even called the Trinity "a three-headed Cerberus" (referring to the mythological dog that guarded the gates of hell), a definition that particularly infuriated Calvin.

Servetus's heresy was actually not new in the history of Christianity. For him, Jesus was fully God because God became flesh in him. Also the Holy Ghost is not a different divine Person; according to Servetus, it is the activity or intervention of God in human life. Therefore the three "Persons" should be interpreted as modes or aspects of God taking an active part in human history. A simpler version of this heresy appeared in the early centuries of the Christian era under the name of Sabellianism, although Servetus's doctrine is much more complex. However, although not being totally innovative in his views, Servetus was the first in modern times to put these opinions against the established dogma of the church in a consistent and well argued form, and at a time when there was growing religious unrest and dissatisfaction in Europe, not just with the Roman Church, but also with Luther and the early Reformers who were seen by many as too moderate and timid in their reforms. Servetus was not asking for more honesty in the church's procedures or for more evangelical poverty and humbleness. He was really putting Christianity on new grounds and asking for a full reinterpretation of the whole Christian mindset.

The scandal was tremendous, not just because the book was dealing with such a touchy subject, but also because Servetus made a point of spreading the news as much as he could. He even sent copies of his books to Spain, which obviously called the attention of the Inquisition. The inquisitors quickly became anxious to imprison and judge him for heresy, and they even used Servetus's own brother to try and lure him back to Spain. But Michael had learnt to be wise and rejected all suggestions to come back. Instead, after publishing a second book to further explain and "correct" the affirmations of his previous book (and which only outraged his opponents even more than before), Michael Servetus prudently decided to disappear from the public scene and a new persona, a "Michel de Villeneuve" (actually a very obvious reference to his birthplace, Villanueva), appeared as an editor in Lyons, France, and later as a student of medicine in Paris.

Servetus, disguised as "Villeneuve" showed at the university the same ability to quickly absorb medical knowledge as he had showed with theology. He was fascinated by the human body and particularly in the art of dissection. It was probably in those days when he understood the function of the pulmonary or minor blood circulation, a discovery that later made him famous worldwide and which shadowed the theological books that actually were his main concern during most of his life.

But Servetus's capacity to enter dangerous ground and run into trouble seemed endless, because during his stay in Paris he became also interested in astrology, and especially the variety that pretends to foresee future world events. This practice, however, was strongly condemned by the political and academic authorities and, under the threat of being censored and even imprisoned (and the even greater risk of being discovered as the author of those infamous anti-trinitarian books that caused such a scandal a few years before), Servetus-Villeneuve opted again for prudence and move to Vienne to exercise medicine, but also to write in secret his final masterpiece and the book that caused his doom: *Restitution of Christianity*.

Even though the book was not published until January of 1553, Servetus already sent a rather complete manuscript to Calvin in 1546, which started a tense exchange of letters in the following years, until Calvin declared to be absolutely fed up with that tough-minded heretic who not only denied the most basic beliefs of Christianity as it was understood since the councils of Nicea and Constantinople in the 4th century, but also treated him, the great Reformer, the builder of the new "Institution" of the Christian religion, with contempt and derision. After all, Servetus's *Restitutio* is first and foremost a response to Calvin's *Institutio*. Calvin was so outraged that he even wrote that, if Servetus was ever found in Geneva, "*I will not suffer him to get out alive*".

When the final version of *Restitutio* was finally (and anonymously) put to print and distributed, Calvin, who was one of the very few who knew the true identity of its author and his whereabouts, did the most unexpected thing in a leader of the Reformation: he denounced "Villeneuve" to the Catholic Inquisition in France, through one of his subordinates, revealing that the discreet physician of Vienne was really Miguel Serveto of Aragon, Spain, the anti-trinitarian heretic. Servetus was then put in prison and questioned, but he somehow managed to escape one more time. The Inquisitors had to resign themselves and burn his wooden effigy instead.

One more, and perhaps the biggest, of the mysteries that surround Servetus's biography is why he decided to go then to Geneva, literally throwing himself into

the arms of the man who hated him most. Some people believed he was just on his way to Italy or to some other Swiss city, where he could find the freedom he needed and also some Italian humanists who agreed with many of his unorthodox views. But also there are some who think that Servetus really wanted a final face-to-face with his archrival to try and convince him of the rightness of his points of views, to cause the final downfall of the trinitarian church and lead the restitution of true Christianity just as St. Michael led the angelic forces against the hosts of Hell. After all, he had already written in a letter to a Genevan Reformed minister, that he was *"well aware that I will die in this enterprise, but my purpose will not waive because of this, as I want to become, as a disciple, similar to my Master"*.

Anyway, there is one aspect of the story that should always be present in our mind and judgement of his actions, namely, that Servetus never tried to use violence or political conspiracy to bring his ideals to life, but until his very last moment he tried to convince others with the power of his words and the strength of his unshakeable convictions.

Whatever the reason that led him to Geneva, he was discovered during the Sunday service and immediately arrested. The heresy trial was implemented with relentless determination toward its predefined outcome. The conditions in jail were inhuman, made to humiliate the wretched prisoner. The sentence was intentionally cruel. Calvin lamented that Servetus was going to be burnt alive instead of beheaded, a more merciful way to finish a human life. A final meeting between the two men did nothing to change the Reformer's mind. The death sentence had been cast months, years ago. Now it was time to carry it out and put an end to such an annoying issue.

However, just as another Reformer and defender of freedom of religion, Sebastian Castellio, wrote shortly afterwards, Servetus's death did not mean the end of his ideas. Italian humanists such as Occhino, Giorgio Biandrata, and Lelius Socinus and his nephew Faustus, disseminated more or less modified versions of the Servetian doctrine in Poland and Transylvania. In Poland, Socinus found sympathy among the members of the Minor Reformed Church, also known today as the "Polish Brethren". In Transylvania, Biandrata found refuge in the court of king Sigismund, carrying copies of Servetus's books (as he himself admitted in one of his letters), and convincing the leader of the local Calvinist church, Ferenc David, about the rightness of the unitarian doctrine. Biandrata later wrote a book, *De Regno Christi* (1569), which is basically a hardly disguised reprint of Servetus's *Restitutio*. The Servetian influence was thus evident in the early Unitarian

Transylvanian Church, and this fact should clarify the discussion about the continuity and evolution of the Servetian doctrine into early Unitarianism.

Next October, representatives of the Unitarian and Calvinist traditions will gather again in Geneva to symbolically close the spiritual breach opened 450 years ago at the stake of Champel in which Servetus was burned with his books. A great international congress that will gather Catholic, Protestant, Unitarian and secular scholars and theologians will also be held in different cities of Aragon, Servetus's homeland, to honor his memory and recover and disseminate the richness of his thought in religion, medicine and other fields, too often dismissed under the glamour of his brash personality. Perhaps now, so many years after the tragedy of a life cut violently short because of the independence of his mind and the intolerance of those who could not accept difference in opinions about religious matters, it is time to bring Servetus, the brilliant student, the daring theologian, the scientific genius, the martyr of tolerance, back from the ashes of Champel to the place he rightly deserves in History.