

A REAL HERETIC

On January 12, 1511, Miguel Servet, whom we know as Michael Servetus, was born in the province of Aragon in Spain. His brother became a priest, while Michael studied medicine and became a physician. Yet the world remembers Michael Servetus primarily for his contribution to the Liberal Reformation.

His *On the Errors of the Trinity* (1531) was a work of quite original and very controversial theology, and it forced him into twenty years of exile under an assumed name. Trying to live by the ethics of Jesus, he practiced medicine, discovered the pulmonary circulation of the blood, and served the community of Vienne, near Lyon, France. Yet his pen could not keep still on religion, and in 1553 he published his masterpiece of theology, a work for which he should be remembered and for which he was martyred, *The Restoration of Christianity*. In this long-forgotten work, now revived and translated into Spanish and soon into English, Servetus argued for a primitive Christianity, that the universe is a manifestation of the creative and loving spirit that is God, and that the individual, as the world as a whole, could and should turn from selfishness to sacrifice, to a life of love and service and emulation of Christ. “The celestial Jerusalem, the heavenly paradise, the Kingdom of Christ is within us with a glory far greater than the glory of Eden,” he wrote. Only when one has by an act of will decided to emulate Christ, should one be baptized as a Christian.

Servetus thus added to his heresy of disbelief in the Trinity the heresies of salvation through character and adult baptism. “Heresy” means “I choose,” and Servetus was a real heretic who found and followed his own religious path. Hunted by the Catholics, Servetus fell into the hands of the arch-enemy of the Catholics, John Calvin, who found his hated baptist leanings so intolerable that he had Servetus burned at the stake in Geneva on October 27, 1553. His damnable book was tied to his body. Both Catholics and Calvinists searched for and burned every copy of *The Restoration of Christianity* that they could find. Today only two complete copies survive.

The burning of Servetus so shocked sensitive and tolerant Christians that it gave great impetus to the new movement for religious toleration. Within a few months, the man who would become the greatest spokesperson for religious toleration in his age, Sebastian Castellio, wrote a ringing plea for the sanctity of the human person and for Christians to turn from persecution to a Christ-like compassion. Castellio’s writing was read all over Europe, condemned by some, and eagerly adopted by early Baptist and Unitarian congregations across Europe. Toleration has been a hallmark of liberal religion ever since.

Ref.: Roland Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Servetus* (1953); Stefan Zweig, *The Right to Heresy: Castellio against Calvin* (1936); and Charles A. Howe, *For Faith and Freedom: A Short History of Unitarianism in Europe* (1997), pp. 19-60.