

The First Translation of *De Trinitate*, the First Part of *Christianismi restitutio*. An Evaluation of its Biblical Theology

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When Servetus was burned alive in Geneva on October 27, 1553, all unbound copies of his major work, *Christianismi restitutio*, went up in smoke together with him. Today only three surviving copies of the original publication are known: 1. one in the National Library of Austria in Vienna; 2. one in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (this copy was most likely used by Germain Colladon, attorney acting on behalf of Nicolas de la Fontaine during Servetus's trial in Geneva); 3. and one copy in the library of the University of Edinburgh. The latter lacks the first sixteen pages and the title page. These were replaced by manuscript pages reproduced in the sixteenth century from another manuscript.

Restitutio was circulated after Servetus's death in the form of copied manuscripts. In 1790 the German erudite, a follower of Unitarianism, Dr. Christoph Gottlieb von Murr made a handwritten copy of the exemplar from the National Library in Vienna and published almost an exact replica of the original book in Nürnberg. There are about 53 exemplars of this publication in various libraries. The Murr reprint was reproduced in 1966 by a new photographic technique and serves today as the research tool for Servetian studies. A reprint of the selected fragments from the *Restitutio* concerning the kingdom of Christ, the kingdom of the Antichrist, pedobaptism and circumcision, was also published by Giorgio Biandrata in Transylvania in 1569. The first translation of a small tractate attached to the *Restitutio* and titled *Sixty Signs of the Antichrist* was made by Grzegorz Paweł in Poland in 1568. The book was translated into German in three volumes by Bernhard Spiess from 1892 to 1896 and into Spanish by Ángel Alcalá and Luis Betés in two separate volumes in 1980 and 1981. The new Spanish translation by the same scholar just appeared as volumes 5 and 6 of the ambitious six-volume edition of *Obras completas* of Servetus. Except for a fragment of a few pages concerning the famous discovery of pulmonary circulation, the book was never translated into English.

For the present translation (together with Christopher A. Hoffman), we used the Murr reprint though it was compared with an identical handwritten transcript of the exemplar located in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Servetus's Latin is not very elaborate or ornate, but rather could be characterized as a "staccato" Latin since it is very technical. Servetus also sometimes creates new words derived from his native Spanish. In contrast to the translation done by Alcalá into an ornate and elaborate Spanish, we decided not to embellish the Servetus style, but rather reproduce it as closely as possible.

Michael Servetus and the Issue of the Trinity

Introduction

Undoubtedly the title of his major work *Restoration of Christianity* is reminiscent of the proposal by Erasmus (1466-1536) which was based on three major premises¹: Erasmus postulated 1. that studying the original texts of the Gospels, the first apostolic writings, and the first Christian theologians still operating in the Greco-Roman social paradigm should be used as the source of religious assertions; 2. that sophisticated theological speculations should be abandoned; 3. that this was necessary in order to reduce the religious beliefs to a small number of fundamental and essential doctrines.

Just as Anabaptists and other reformers demanded radical changes in the social structures of the society and doctrines of the church, so Servetus demanded a radical evaluation of the entire ideological religious system of assertions and dogmas imposed on the Western World since the fourth century. Inspired by the rising spirit of reform, he envisioned a plan to restore Christianity to its original simplicity and integrity as suggested by Erasmus. His approach involved radical critical thinking and his theological inquiry initiated the study of scriptural tradition in an attempt to uncover the real religious doctrines contained in it. In the process he developed a new more humane religion and a new understanding of divinity and divine matters closer to the realities of the human condition. This critical thinking methodology was one of his two major legacies.² The other legacy concerns the function of society at the moral level. Servetus realized the full potential of human nature, its capabilities, and rationality. Thus he demanded the freedom of intellectual inquiry, thought, conscience, and expression that was denied to millions on doctrinal theological grounds. By his sacrifice Servetus set into motion a process of change in the entire social paradigm and the recovery of the right to freedom of conscience.

Evolving Christianity

Christianity did not originate in the form known in the sixteenth century during the Reformation or as it is known today. In fact someone estimated that there have been about 23,000 Christianities. This may be an optimistic underestimate – one should say rather that there are probably as many Christianities as there are believers claiming to be Christians. Such a statement, however, is not productive for the evaluation of the evolution of a religion. It would be better if we could differentiate some general patterns in the development of the key religious doctrine. It seems that the evolution of Christianity can be analyzed in terms of four general patterns:

1. It started as a Jewish Messianism with the figure of the Messiah as a glorified man and the expected earthly Kingdom of God. This is the basic message of early Christianity though one can distinguish here the Pauline and Gospel varieties. Paul understands divinity in the Hellenistic manner and the Hebrew Son of Man was identified

with the Hellenic Savior whereas the Gospels still operate with the Hebrew concept of divinity and of the Messiah. The last pattern was revived in the doctrine of the Socinian Church in the sixteenth century.³ But Socinians by adopting a rational method in the eighteenth century went much further in their analysis of scripture and religious matters laying foundations for the Enlightenment and modern liberal religions, including Unitarian Universalism. It suffices to quote Joachim Stegman, Sr., who wrote:

Though the Holy Scripture is authoritative, its authority can be assessed exclusively by the judgment of our reason. Because of this the Holy Scripture cannot contradict reason, just as faith should not contradict reason. Indeed, faith follows the judgment of reason and believes that which reason judges worthy of belief.⁴

2. From around the turn of the first century the figure of the Savior Jesus was deified and a Messianism changed into a Hellenistic Christianity in its two forms: in one the Messiah figure was transformed into the cosmic Greek Logos of Philo of Alexandria and of Numenius by Justin Martyr (ca 100-165); and in the other, the Gnostic form, in which the Logos is only one of many divine manifestations.

3. Such a situation created problems in maintaining Jewish monotheism. Thus various approaches were developed to reconcile the Middle Platonic interpretation of divinity with monotheism by adopting the Egyptian triune doctrine in the first Trinitarian or syncretic interpretation by Tertullian (ca 170-220) which tends to reemphasize the Unitarian character of the divinity, preserving the Greek triadic speculations. We find the fully developed Trinitarian doctrine in Augustine (354-430)⁵ and it was promulgated in one form or another in a sequence of church Councils: Nicaea 325, the First Council of Constantinople 381, the Council of Chalcedon 451, the Third Council of Toledo 589, the Fourth Lateran Council 1215, and the Council of Trent 1546. The Trinitarian synthesis only for a variety of coincidental historical reasons became the dominant doctrine widely popularized.

4. The last is the Servetian Unitarian Christianity which interprets the divinity and its manifestations as a historical, modalistic process. This pattern found its modern expression in the so-called “process theology” of which Servetus was a precursor.”⁶

Thought of medieval writers on the Trinity.

To understand the ideological background for the development of the Servetian Unitarian Christianity, one has to analyze the views of the medieval writers concerning the Trinity. This is especially, because in the Middle Ages Christianity faced a new opposition in the form of a strictly Unitarian Islam allied ideologically with Judaism, and had to defend its traditional Trinitarian formulations. Thus three scholastic schools developed which tried to deal with the issue of the Trinity.

The first one is classified as illustrative originating with Augustine. It claimed that though the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be demonstrated, at least it can be

illustrated. Augustine asserted that the doctrine can be known only through revelation, but not directly, as it is deducible from the scripture. It can be illustrated only by way of analogy with the human constitution. Thus he developed a number of similitudes of which three are most frequently quoted namely, that of the loved, the lover, and love; that of mind, love, and knowledge thereof; that of memory, intellect, and will. Such an interpretation of the psychological Trinity, though illustrative, was treated as proof because the human inner constitution was considered as an image of God (*imago Dei*). This approach was continued by others: Boethius, The Lombard, Anselm, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, and Scotus.

The second school, the demonstrative, commenced with Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173) and asserted that this doctrine can also be demonstrated. His approach was based on metaphysics considering God as a dynamic being, *Bonum diffusivum sui*, in line with the Neoplatonic views, and one who is diversified within his own being. Richard of St. Victor was followed by William of Auvergne, William of Auxerre, Alexander of Hales, Bonaventura, and to a degree Henri de Gand (d. 1293).

The third school, the fideist, started with William Occam (1280-1349) who denied that the doctrine can be illustrated or demonstrated, claiming that it can only be believed by the authority of the church. He represented a school known today by the name of Modernists and who took a Nominalist philosophical position. According to it universals were denied and reality was considered as consisting of unrelated particulars. Thus, if the concept of one substance uniting the three persons is retained, then it represents a fourth entity, and the Trinity becomes a quaternary as was postulated by Joachim of Fiore (1132-1202). Moreover, if the three persons are not held together by one substance, then they become three distinct entities representing tritheism. Neither the concept of “relation” which was equated by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) with substance nor the concept of “person” would constitute a “universal” binding the three entities. Thus from a philosophical point of view, Occam asserted that the doctrine of the Trinity means that there are three absolutes: “For the syllogism: God is a Trinity, the Father is God, therefore the Father is a Trinity, is sound according to Aristotelian logic, but fallacious from the point of faith...” And, “The diverse scientific disciplines (*scientiis*) are not able to establish that God is Three and One. This can be proved only in theology on the basis of faith.”⁷ The other members of this school of Modernists were Robert Holcot (d. 1349) who listed sixteen contrarities, and Gregory of Rimini (d. 1358) who stated that the derivation of the Son and of the Spirit is ineffable and incomprehensible.⁸ Pierre D’Ailly (1350-1420) conceded on the basis of the decrees of the Councils that some of the determinations of the Church do not come from deductions from the scripture, but by a special revelation to Catholics via a special gift of God. His claim was that the doctrine of the Trinity involves only verbal and not real inconsistency, thus we may say *personaliter* that there are three gods, but he stated “Such an expression though true and proper among experts is, nevertheless, not customary and should be avoided for the sake of simple believers.”⁹ The assertions of D’Ailly were repeated by John Major

(1469-1550) and later by Erasmus: “According to dialectical logic it is possible to say there are three gods, but to announce this to the untutored would give great offense.”¹⁰

Servetus read all available ancient and contemporary literature and rejected all the arguments of the illustrative and demonstrative schools as untenable, and enhanced the skepticism of the fideist school but did not accept the authority of the church institution in defining the faith. Though he embraced the empirical epistemology, his destruction of the orthodox view is based on biblical arguments and not on philosophical analysis. His latest doctrine of divine manifestations, however, can be traced to biblical analysis in light of Neo-Platonism. The impetus to such an attitude came undoubtedly from the emphasis on the scripture produced by the Reformation in the sixteenth century. An additional argument for it was the difficulty in conversion of the Jews and Muslims who objected to the doctrine of the Trinity as tritheism, especially when judged from its popular pictorial representations. In his magisterial essay, Roland Bainton reconstructs Servetus’s thinking this way:

Was then this doctrine [the doctrine of the Trinity] which must be accepted on pain of banishment or death actually true and essential to the Christian faith? Troubled by this question Servetus examined the New Testament and was perfectly amazed to discover that this tenet so rigorously required and so obstinately refused was actually not formulated in the Sacred Scriptures. There is, indeed, something about the Father and something about the Son and something about the Holy Ghost, but the traditional formula of the three persons and the one substance is not there. The word Trinity does not occur. The key word *homoousios*, that is to say that the Son is con-substantial with the Father, is likewise absent. And although the Son is declared to be the only begotten of the Father, the Spirit is nowhere declared to have proceeded either from the Father or from the Son. Much of this formulation was the work of the Council of Nicaea which frankly admitted that the doctrine implicit in Scripture cannot be unequivocally expressed in Biblical terms. Servetus was convinced that nothing should be deemed essential to the Christian faith which is not in the Scripture.¹¹

Modalistic historical Trinity and the vital spirit

Servetus is primarily known for two results of his critical studies. One is his exhaustive study of the scripture which demonstrated that there is no basis for maintaining the traditional Trinitarian doctrine. Rather, he postulated a historical progressive view of the Trinity as a true **manifestation of God’s essence** first in the Word understood literally as God’s pronouncement or, in a mystical sense, as God’s essence, and then in **the human Jesus, the natural Son of God**, and finally after Jesus’ resurrection, in **the Spirit, which is nothing else but God’s way of communicating** with humanity. Thus the Son of God and the Spirit are two substantial modes of God’s manifestation in the historical context, in the body of Christ externally and in the Spirit internally.

The other is Servetus's discovery of blood circulation eighty two years before William Harvey (1578-1657) as well as a detailed description of pulmonary circulation and new capillary vessels in the lungs and brain. He first put his discovery in writing in 1546 and included it in his major theological work *Christianismi restitutio* (1553). Servetus's view of the soul was not according to the Greek-Platonic doctrine but the Hebrew one. He believed that the human soul is a vivifying agent and that it comes directly from God. Thus the fetus lives with the soul of the mother until the moment of the child's first breath. Then the human vital spirit is maintained in the circulating blood according to the scriptural view of the soul (Gen. 9:3; Lev. 17:11; Deut. 2:7). It originated from the "breath of lives" (Gen. 2:7) and in Servetus's description : "One is breath of many human lives vivifying body and spirit : vegetative life, sensitive life, and intellectual life."¹² Moreover this idea corresponded to the physiological doctrine of Galen who taught that it was the liver that was generating the vital spirit (*pneuma psychicon*).

The publication of Servetus's scientific discovery in a theological work is a **reflection of his unifying world view**. For Servetus theology was of primary importance and with it he was able to explain all natural phenomena. For him this particular anatomical and physiological study was an empirical method and only an illustration for understanding the workings of the divine Spirit. It supported the biblical world view which was the basis of all knowledge.

Brief Summary of the major themes of Servetus's work.

The first part of *Restoration of Christianity* is entitled "Treatise Concerning the Divine Trinity in seven Books." It contains five books on the treatise proper and two books on the two dialogues on the Trinity.

Book One – deals with the discussion of Jesus Christ as a human being and contains three axioms:

1. that Jesus Christ was a man, a human being;
2. that he was truly the natural son of God and not a metaphysical, invisible entity in the Godhead;
3. that he is God because he is the human manifestation of God's spirit, God's substance. He is divine by virtue of being the natural son of God;

Book Two – discusses twenty key biblical passages which confirm that Jesus was the biological son of God through the Word that became outwardly visible. Next that God communicates with humankind through the holy spirit which is nothing else but God's spirit operating in the world.

Book Three – expands the concept of Jesus as the hypostasis of the Word of God which became a human being. It focuses on the prefiguration of the person or manifestation of Christ in the Word, the appearance of God and the hypostasis of the Word.

Book Four – which is the most mystical of all, interprets God's manifestations in his different names used in the biblical texts, and presents Jesus as the mystical origin of all things. The spirit of God is treated as the "form of all forms."

Book Five – discusses the holy spirit which is God’s action in the world. This book also contains a description of Servetus’s discovery of pulmonary circulation, capillary blood vessels and the “renewal” of blood by inspiration of the divine spirit which in modern terms could be described as its oxygenation.

The two books of Dialogues expand the previous themes in the form of a dialogue between Michael representing Servetus and his interlocutor, Peter.

The First Dialogue shows how the Jewish Law was fulfilled and explains its culmination in Christ. **The Second Dialogue** explains the manner of Christ’s generation arguing that he is not a creature, but truly God.

The Trinity and modern scholarship

The Christian churches, following the Roman Catholic church, maintained until recently that the doctrine of the triune God was contained in the scriptural texts of the Old and the New Testaments and that such was their message. The doctrine was firmly established in the fourth century by combining it with a means of coercion in the form of state law and preventing any independent scholarly study of the sacred texts. It took the Reformation and Radical Reformation to initiate a painful and often bloodily repressed process of a reevaluation of the sacred texts and a return to their original meaning.

Modern theologians came finally to acknowledge that there is nothing in the New Testament writings that would warrant discussion about the divinity of Jesus or his pre-existence and the Trinity. In his 1972 exhaustive study Edmund J. Fortman, a Catholic theologian, summarized it this way:

The formulation of this dogma was the most important theological achievement of the first five centuries of the Church ... yet this monumental dogma, celebrated in the liturgy by the recitation of the Nicene creed, seems to many even within the Church to be a museum piece, with little or no relevance to the crucial problems of contemporary life and thought. And to those outside the Church, the trinitarian dogma is a fine illustration of the absurd length to which theology has been carried, a bizarre formula of ‘sacred arithmetic.’¹³

Fortman’s study was followed recently by that of yet another Catholic theologian, Karl-Josef Kuschel, and by that of Anthony F. Buzzard and Charles F. Hunting.¹⁴ The prominent Catholic theologian Karl-Josef Kuschel states:

The New Testament does not know the pre-existence as a speculative theme. A pre-existence christology understood as an isolated, independent, atomized reflection on a divine being of Jesus Christ 'in' or 'alongside' God before the world, a sonship understood in metaphysical terms, is not the concern of the New Testament."

And he admits that the statement about pre-existence is not a direct revelation, but a result of theological speculation.¹⁵

Concluding remarks

Concluding this short sketch of the evolution of the doctrine of the Trinity and its interpretation by Servetus, I will signal only a few consequences and results of the seminal thoughts of Servetus.

Today biblical scholars confirm the discovery of Servetus and his universal monotheistic understanding of the divinity.¹⁶

Philosophers and religious scholars develop a further Servetian understanding of the divinity which manifests itself and evolves in a historical process in the new concepts of process theology.¹⁷

Others, however, reject the ontological concept of divinity and replace it with a concept of natural laws (Paul Davies).¹⁸ Still others recognizing the importance of human values, which were also recognized by Servetus as the basis for religion, make them the center of a new humanistic “religion,” a religion of the “Highest Values” as one propounded by a Polish philosopher of religion, Stanislaw Cieniawa.¹⁹

All these intellectual ideas and movements can flourish only in the environment of unhindered and free exercise of inquiry which is also a heritage of Servetus’s thought and especially of his martyrdom.

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