

Michael Servetus

1511 - 1553

He participated in the Protestant Reformation, and later developed a nontrinitarian Christology. Condemned by Catholics and Protestants alike, he was arrested in Geneva and burnt at the stake as a heretic by order of the Protestant Geneva governing council, at the instigation of the Protestant Reformer John Calvin.

Servetus believed that Protestant reformers Luther, Calvin and Zwingli were not revolutionary enough, because they accepted the doctrine of the Trinity, which he viewed as incomprehensible. Failing to convince the reformers of Basel and Stasbourg of his ideas, Servetus decided to write a book that would persuade all Christians of the truth of his discoveries. He introduced the Greek philosophical terms and nonbiblical concepts into the definitions of the Trinity that were abstract, speculative and unrelated to the living God. He claimed Christianity had failed because it had become corrupted in the early fourth century by pagan doctrines and by the church's acquiring of temporal power. Calvin ordered his arrest after Servetus returned a version of Calvin's own "*Institutes of the Christian Religion*" heavily annotated with criticisms. He was burned at the stake October 27, 1553. Servetus was the first person to be executed as a heretic on the authority of the reformed church, and it was for denying the Trinity.

He wrote "*On the Errors of the Trinity*" and in 1553 Servetus published yet another religious work with further anti-trinitarian views. It was entitled *Christianismi Restitutio* (Christianity Restored), a work that sharply rejected the idea of predestination and the idea that God condemned souls to Hell regardless of worth or merit. This aimed to refute the orthodox Christianity that Servetus' old colleague, John Calvin, supported. After the book spread through the ranks of Protestant hierarchy, Servetus was tried and agonizingly burned at the stake, the last known copy of the *Restitutio* chained to his leg.

One record of the book "*Christianity Restored*" as being reprinted by Richard Mead, the physician to the King of England in 1723, but the government burned the entire printing. 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.

In these books, Servetus rejected the belief of the Trinity, stating that it was not based on the Bible. He noted that it arose from teachings of (Greek) philosophers, and he advocated a return to the supposed simplicity of the Gospels and the early Church Fathers.

Michael Servetus is one of those hidden figureheads of history who is remembered not for his name, but for the revolutionary deeds that stand in his place. Both a scientist and a freethinking theologian, Servetus is credited with the discovery of pulmonary circulation in the human body as well as the authorship of a polemical masterpiece that cost him his life.

Servetus's execution is significant because it marked a turning point in the quest for freedom of expression, due largely to the development of the printing press and the proliferation of books in Renaissance Europe. Three copies of the *Restitutio* managed to survive the burning, despite every effort on the part of his enemies to destroy them. As a result, the book became almost a surrogate for its author, going into hiding and relying on covert distribution until it could be read freely, centuries later.

Out of the Flames (by Lawrence Goldstone and Nancy Bazelon Goldstone) tracks the history of this special work, examining Servetus's life and times and the politics of the first information during the sixteenth century. The authors follow the clandestine journey of the three copies through the subsequent centuries and explore its author's legacy and influence over the thinkers that shared his spirit and genius, providing testament to the power of ideas, the enduring legacy of books, and the triumph of individual courage.