

[Questions and answers to be in Newsnight style, and speed!]

adapted from *Calvin and Servetus* by Louis W. Jones, San Mateo, Ca. U.S.A.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus, you are described in some encyclopaedias as a theologian and physician, and in others as a physician and theologian. Which description do you prefer?

SERVETUS: It makes no great difference. My life's concerns and most of my writings were mainly theological, but most of my earnings were as a practicing physician.

INTERVIEWER: Which of your writings do you consider the most important?

SERVETUS: I put most of my energies into the book entitled *Restoration of Christianity*, and it was this book that led to my being put to death. I may be the first person in history to have been put to death for writing a book.

INTERVIEWER: Your first publication, at age 20, was *Errors of the Trinity*, was it not?

SERVETUS: That is correct.

INTERVIEWER: What impelled you to write this?

SERVETUS: I had gone to see Erasmus and other theologians and tried to convince them that the Trinity concept was wrong, but they would not listen. Perhaps I was abrasive. Then I hit upon the idea of publishing my ideas, in order that all scholars might judge.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have trouble finding a printer?

SERVETUS: Yes indeed. But I found a friendly printer in Switzerland who referred me to a German printer, who printed it anonymously.

INTERVIEWER: Did you identify yourself as the author?

SERVETUS: . Yes.

INTERVIEWER: You had studied law as a teenager at Toulouse?

SERVETUS: Yes, but I also read the Bible, and was astonished to find there a religion quite different from the one I had been taught. What I had been taught was an inscrutable holy mystery, which I had to profess to believe, and was not allowed to question.

INTERVIEWER: Is it true that you treated traditional scholars with contempt, and even used offensive epithets?

SERVETUS: Yes, but it must be remembered that abuse was quite common in the polemics of that era. My being young and without prestige must have constituted an irritant. It certainly did not help my case. I was the target of a great amount of invective.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus, as to your booklet, *Errors of the Trinity*, was it well read?

SERVETUS: It was something of a best seller.

INTERVIEWER: What was the main point of the book?

SERVETUS: That the Council of Nicea, held in 325 had decided wrongly, and that the dogma of the Trinity is incompatible with the unity of the divine nature. Actually, the dogma was adopted

by majority vote of the bishops, who were pressured by Emperor Constantine to come to an agreement or else. So the Trinity decision was essentially a political one.

INTERVIEWER: Would you explain just what is meant by the Trinity?

SERVETUS: It is quite complicated, but one essential ingredient is that Jesus was a god, that is, of the same substance as God Almighty, and that three persons constituted the Christian God, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

INTERVIEWER: What does the Bible say about the Trinity?

SERVETUS: Nothing at all. It's solely a matter of interpretation.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus, were you in any way influenced by Martin Luther?

SERVETUS: I was six years old when he took his stand against the Pope. Yes, I was influenced by all the leaders of the Reformation, but I thought they didn't go far enough.

INTERVIEWER: What happened after publication of Errors of the Trinity?

SERVETUS: The book was banned. Copies were destroyed, and orders were issued for my arrest.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

SERVETUS: I had questioned the concept that had been accepted for twelve centuries. This greatly disturbed church authorities, and it forced theologians to justify a doctrine that had previously been left untouched. The Church was not ready for any such radical thinking.

INTERVIEWER: Did your ideas gain acceptance?

SERVETUS: Not visibly. But they stimulated thinking in many quarters.

INTERVIEWER: What did Catholics think of your book?

SERVETUS: They were mostly silent at the time. But later some said this was an example of the errors and confusion that Protestantism could lead to.

INTERVIEWER: You say orders were issued for your arrest. How did you elude the authorities?

SERVETUS: I took an assumed name, and entered the University in Paris to study medicine.

INTERVIEWER: Did you receive a degree?

SERVETUS: Not in the formal sense, but I completed the studies and even lectured in certain fields.

INTERVIEWER: While later practicing medicine you were charged with being a quack, mainly because you believed in astrology. Was the charge true?

SERVETUS: I believed that a doctor should be versed in weather forecasting, and in geography, and other sciences as well. I pointed out that Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Galen, Hypocrites and others recognized the validity of astrological medicine. Why have signs been established by the Creator if they may not signify something? I said that those are blind who never lift their eyes to the heavens to behold the most beautiful mechanism of Creation, and that doctors who decline to avail themselves of all aids are ignoramuses.

INTERVIEWER: And then you published a journal article entitled Apology for Astrology?

SERVETUS: Yes, although the faculty at the University sought to prevent it. I was later brought to trial for medical heresy -- for being insolent toward certain faculty Members and I was disciplined.

INTERVIEWER: Let's move on to your most important writing, the Restoration of Christianity. How old were you when you wrote this?

SERVETUS: I finished it in 1553, or at age 42. I had mulled it over for ten or more years while practicing as a physician, and while editing numerous geographies and Bible translations.

INTERVIEWER: What did you expect to accomplish by the book?

SERVETUS: I sought to effect a reformation enormously superior to Calvin's, Luther's and Zwingli's. I was proposing what I sincerely thought was genuine Christianity.

INTERVIEWER: Did you discuss your book with Calvin beforehand?

SERVETUS: No. I could never get to see him. I sent him a manuscript of the book and we corresponded for a while. Later I asked him to return the manuscript and never got an answer. I knew then I was in trouble.

INTERVIEWER: Catholics in Vienne, France, burnt you in effigy in 1553, along with five packages of your book. Do you feel that Calvin, over in Geneva, Switzerland, had anything to do with it?

SERVETUS: He must have. It was the manuscript - the same one -I had loaned him years earlier - that showed up at the trial at which I was convicted.

INTERVIEWER: After your escape from Catholic authorities in France, and after you were burned in effigy why did you seek refuge in Geneva, Switzerland, the city under Calvin's domination?

SERVETUS: I am going to let historians speculate as to whether this was merely a stopover on the way to sanctuary in another country, like Italy where I had friends, or whether I still expected to conciliate Calvin at a personal interview or whether I was acting out a death wish. Of course, any place was safer than Catholic France

INTERVIEWER: And you were immediately arrested in Geneva?

SERVETUS: Yes, and it was a breach of international law. I had committed no offence in Geneva. None of my books had been written or printed there.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus, the record shows that during the trial you charged Calvin with being an assassin, a liar, slanderer, and otherwise vilified him. Is that true?

SERVETUS: Yes I had been rotting in prison, like a mangy dog left to die upon a dunghill, befouled by my own excrement, shackled in irons, clad in stinking rags, wearied by sleepless nights, and worried about the malicious insinuations about my sex life. I am afraid I lost my self-control.

INTERVIEWER: What was your reaction when you learned of the sentence?

SERVETUS: In my cell I had vainly imagined that I had perhaps convinced the judges of the soundness of my thesis. So, when the man came to the cell and read the sentence I am afraid I broke down with grief, but only temporarily.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus can you explain just why Protestants, who broke away from the Catholic Church because of differences of opinion, should persecute other Protestants for their differences of opinion?

SERVETUS: The Protestant movement was founded on the right of everyone to his own interpretation of scripture. Thus the very notion of "heretic" is absurd. Voltaire called my execution the first "religious murder" of the Reformation, and a plain repudiation of the basic Protestant idea. Luther and other Protestant notables were opposed to such punishment. Luther, for instance, said, quote: Heresy is a spiritual affair which cannot be washed away by earthly fire or earthly water . . .Heretics must not be suppressed or held down by physical force, but only combated by the word of God...I can by no means approve that false doctors shall be put to death, unquote.

INTERVIEWER: Dr Servetus, you are credited with discovering the pulmonary circulation of the blood, that is, that blood circulates through the lungs and back to the heart. Yet this discovery was published not in a medical paper, but was buried in a theological paper, namely, your Restoration of Christianity, for which you were burned at the stake. How is it that you could mix medicine and theology in this fashion, and what was Christianity to do circulation of the blood?

SERVETUS: This may be difficult to explain. In those days, one branch of learning blended into another. Medicine, theology, astronomy, astrology, anatomy, mathematics and law were all closely interrelated.

INTERVIEWER: But Christianity and blood circulation?

SERVETUS: To put it simply I believed that all life and matter were interrelated, and that the blood had to be purified in some way, or as the, say, to be aerated, and this had to be done in the lungs, where the divine spirit, in the form of air, was inhaled.

INTERVIEWER: Wasn't this pure conjecture on your part?

SERVETUS: No indeed. My studies of anatomy showed that the blood did not seep from one side of the heart as had been taught for 14 hundred, but that it actually flowed from the right side of the heart to the lungs and then back to the left side of the heart.

INTERVIEWER: We still don't understand how this important medical discovery got into a book on Christianity.

SERVETUS: It was part of my proposal for a return to true Christianity. I thought at the time that soul and spirit were pretty much the same, and that soul is in the blood, not static, but coursing throughout the body. There is Scriptural support for this idea, namely, Genesis 9:4 and Leviticus 17:11.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus, as Unitarians we want to explore your beliefs thoroughly. You believe in separation of church and state?

SERVETUS: Yes, and said so in my writings. It was a revolutionary idea at the time. You know from your history that church and state were virtually one from the days of Emperor Constantine. In those days there was no other form of rule.

INTERVIEWER: Briefly, what was your religious belief?

SERVETUS: I believed that, by and large, God as incomprehensible, but that there was a divine spirit that permeated all things. I wrote that God fills all things, even Hell itself. Some people have characterized me as a pantheist, but it is more accurate to say I was an Emanationist.

INTERVIEWER: And your belief about Jesus Christ?

SERVETUS: That he was the foremost example of the divine spirit or essence.

INTERVIEWER: And about man, or humankind?

SERVETUS: That every person is infused with divine spirit. You can also call it love. I believed that faith alone does not suffice, for it will pass away, whereas love and love alone abides. As I said then, faith lights the lamp which is kept burning by the oil of love.

INTERVIEWER: And your view about the church as an institution?

SERVETUS: Simply fellowship of the spirit on Earth.

INTERVIEWER: Original sin?

SERVETUS: I believe that the inward person cannot sin, but the inward person is not the whole person and we repeatedly fall short.

INTERVIEWER: Baptism?

SERVETUS: I believe that children should not be baptized but dedicated. Baptism for adult is all right at around the age 30, the same age at which Jesus was baptized.

INTERVIEWER: But why shouldn't children also be baptized?

SERVETUS: In my view baptism is meaningless unless preceded by faith and repentance, which are inconceivable as children. I called infant baptism a detestable abomination.

INTERVIEWER: The record shows you were convicted in Geneva on two counts of heresy. What were these?

SERVETUS: Denial of the Trinity and denial of infant baptism.

INTERVIEWER: It still remains a mystery as to why you sought conciliation and understanding with the man, John Calvin, who ultimately brought about your death. Can you clarify?

SERVETUS: You see, Calvin himself in his earlier years had questioned the dogma of the Trinity. He once declared that the Nicene Creed was better fitted to be sung as a song than recited as a confession of belief. There were signs of wavering orthodoxy, and I thought Calvin was my best bet, especially since he was a leader of great influence in his chosen country, Switzerland.

INTERVIEWER: Were you the first individual to challenge the Trinity doctrine?

SERVETUS: No. I merely built on the thinking of scores of scholars and theologians in the previous 14 centuries, beginning with Arius at the Council of Nicea, the bishop who was outvoted. I maintained that the Trinity idea was adopted because of political pressures and a desire to reconcile Judeo-Christian teaching with Greek philosophy. There were many anti-Trinitarian tendencies. I was merely the first to go public.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus, nowadays when a person has a "cause" he recruits followers and begins a campaign to change public thinking. Why didn't you do this?

SERVETUS: It wasn't my way I was merely a scholar, and all my writings were for other scholars. I wanted discussion, and refutation if possible, and I got only condemnation. The general public, moreover, was commanded to believe this or that.

INTERVIEWER: How was this done?

SERVETUS: Three emperors of the Holy Roman Empire had issued orders to believe in the Holy Trinity. Freedom of the mind did not exist in those days. Ideas about religion and government were formulated at the top, and passed down. People were simply told, what to believe. I sought to bring my influence to bear on the formulation of doctrine, not on its acceptance.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Servetus, in one of your letters to Calvin you said, quote, Instead of one God you have a three-headed Cerberus [pronounced SURberus], instead of a faith you have a fatal dream, and you say that good works are nothing but empty pictures, unquote. Do you mean to imply that good works are an essential part of Christianity?

SERVETUS: Yes, and Calvin, with his doctrine of predestination, thought it made no difference.

INTERVIEWER: What did Catholics think about Calvin's charging you with heresy?

SERVETUS: Well, one French Cardinal said it was like one heretic accusing another.

INTERVIEWER: Luther and Calvin are today known as leaders of the Protestant Reformation. What did you propose to accomplish that they did not?

SERVETUS: They simply did not go far enough. They did not reach the heart of the matter.

INTERVIEWER: Getting back to theology, you believed that God is everywhere. Then, in your view, if I stamp my foot on the floor, I am stamping on God. Isn't that absurd?

SERVETUS: I have no doubt that a bench or anything is substantially God. My fundamental principle is that all things are a part and portion of God and the nature of things is the substantial spirit of God. If you say that in stamping your foot you did not move in God, you must therefore, have moved in the devil. We move and are in God in whom we live. Even if you are a blind demon you are sustained nevertheless by God.¹

It was this same point that infuriated my accusers at Geneva.

¹ Bainton, Roland H. (1953) p. 186

INTERVIEWER: The record shows that most protestant leaders approved of your being burned at the stake. Had they read your book?

SERVETUS: None of them had read it studiously, and most had never even seen it. Every copy was burned except three. They took Calvin's word for everything.

INTERVIEWER: There were charges against your character, and even your sex life, at the Geneva trial - is that correct?

SERVETUS: Yes, but they were false. I had lived as a sincere and virtuous Christian, and my only desire was to correct some longstanding errors of doctrine. Actually I believed in the Trinity, not as three persons or three substances, but only as three manifestations of the one divine spirit.

INTERVIEWER: But Calvin at the trial said you tried to extinguish sound doctrine and overthrow all religion?

SERVETUS: He distorted my position. Our differences about the Trinity were, in retrospect, very slight.

INTERVIEWER: At the Geneva trial, were you allowed the benefit of counsel?

SERVETUS: No.

INTERVIEWER: You knew you were courting death?

SERVETUS: Yes, but somehow I was unable to believe that a progressive Christian, such as Calvin, would permit a death penalty. I thought, foolishly perhaps, that he would advocate exile or some other punishment.

INTERVIEWER: And you got, instead, death by burning at the stake?

SERVETUS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did you request death by the sword, that is, beheading?

SERVETUS: Yes. I was afraid that during the torture of burning I would recant. My request, however, was denied. The judges must have thought burning alive was necessary to extinguish unwelcome ideas.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Calvin said you yourself probably believed that heretics should be put to death. Is this true?

SERVETUS: No, and I wasn't really a heretic. I was a devout Christian. I had studied the Bible thoroughly in the original Greek and Hebrew, and had edited and translated several editions. Discussing possible errors in prevailing theology, exactly as ancient theologians did, could not rightly be construed as heresy.

INTERVIEWER: One final question. Do you think political considerations entered into your sentence at Geneva?

SERVETUS: Yes. The final decision was made not by the clergy but by magistrates of the Swiss cities. These magistrates feared that the opposition party would somehow adopt my position and thus gain power.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you, Dr. Servetus.