Archangel Michael vs. the Antichrist: The Servetian Drama of the Apocalypse

Jerome Friedman

Michael Servetus was born in Navarre in 1509 or 1511, and died in 1553. During his short lifetime he was burnt in absentia by Catholic authorities in Vienne as well as in the flesh in Geneva. This Spaniard’s tumultuous life led George Williams to write: “Michael Servetus of Navarre was indeed the veritable effigy for Catholic and Protestant alike of all that seemed execrable in the Radical Reformation.” Even in an age of widespread dissent Servetus’ writings were considered an outrage. His name was so well known all over Europe that he was forced to flee from country to country, assuming an alias in his search for refuge.

Aside from his religious writings, Servetus practiced at a variety of professions with great success. He edited a polyglot version of the Bible, adding very unconventional notes on the nature of prophecy; practiced medicine and wrote tracts on various medical issues while discovering the pulmonary circulation of the blood. His work in the field of geography has been recognized as a contribution to the study of comparative geography and demography. In addition, Servetus was thrown off of the medical faculty of the University of Paris for practicing ‘judicial astrology’, fortune telling. Even after his death Servetus’ name was associated with subversive causes. His execution in Geneva became a focal point for those who advanced the cause of religious toleration, and for a time it appeared that Servetus would cause far greater discomfort to the good pastors of Geneva after his death than during his brief tenure on earth. Today Servetus is generally considered a pioneer in those trends of thought which later culminated in modern Unitarianism. But among all the images associated with the name Michael Servetus rarely, if ever, does one find that of millenarian or chiliast.

Thinking of millenarianism brings several diverse pictures to mind, but Servetus was none of these. Not a Tanchelm claiming to be Christ, or a Master of Hungary or Peter the Hermit possessing a written commission from the Virgin Mary to usher in some new order. Neither was Servetus an ecstatic Flagellant reliving Christ’s passion through self mutilation and thereby assuming divine powers. Conversely, Servetus was not a follower of the Brethren of the Free Spirit who cleansed themselves through sexual intercourse with as many people as possible. Similarly, there is no evidence that Servetus shared even a mild interest in Thomas Muntzer, the Drummer of Niklashousen, or any other person who sought some measure of social and economic reorganization in the coming Kingdom of the Saints. Servetus was none of these and for this reason he has escaped millenarian identification to date.

At first glance it would appear that Servetus’ apocalyptic thought was dominated by the figure of the Antichrist, and only secondarily concerned with the returned Christ and Kingdom of God. In Servetus’ schema, Christ and Antichrist are rival forces with the fulfillment of time bringing the victory of Christ over His adversary. In many locations this dualism is made apparent as when Servetus wrote: “Satan was incarnated as a beast, ascending from the Abyss of the sea to become Pope on Earth, just as the Word of God, descending from the sky, was made a man on Earth; one as Christ, the other Antichrist.” Indeed, Servetus saw in the Antichrist a power, albeit destructive, as great as that of Christ Himself. Above, the term ‘incarnated’ was used to refer to the Antichrist though
it is conventionally employed almost exclusively in reference to Christ, but this was not the only similarity between the two. "Perchance you oppose us, that [even] before the Papacy the Spirit of the Antichrist came to be, as John teaches. We conclude this: The Spirit of the Antichrist commenced together with the beginning of the Spirit of Christ, but occupied the Papal authority."7 Thus, just as goodness existed from all time, so too did the force of evil. Though history is a series of encounters between the two, the first confrontation came in the Garden of Eden where man, created after the image of Christ and possessing a divine breathe of life, succumbed to the Devil represented by the form of a Serpent. The result, Servetus explained, is that "God withdraws from us and the Serpent enters; two great evils."8 The purely religious consequences of original sin are spiritual death and human weakness, but in our context equally important are the cosmic effects which resulted in Satan taking possession of God's creation. "Having accepted authority over man, the demon accepted authority over that which was made for man's use, as in the case of animals over whom authority was at first given to man. The evil one extended itself to animals who were infected by the Serpent and [thus] do us harm. The evil is especially present in the earth itself, in fruits. The pollution in animals is from the demon's infection."9 So great was the earthly pollution of Satan that paradise itself was a nest of corruption.10 And yet, even this did not exhaust the power of the Serpent. "The heavenly bodies are ruined and filled with it [evil] for the heavenly bodies are polluted with the Serpent. The stars, which are from the time of the creation of the universe, are now openly free of God . . . and sin and harm now flow from there."11

While Satan's efforts have been recorded in the Old Testament, it is only with Christ's assumption of flesh, and the demon's incarnation, that the latter increased his activity and assumed his role of Antichrist. As a consequence, the rivalry between good and evil was heightened. Surely there were many who served Satan, but Servetus identified the Gnostic teacher Simon Magus as the leading official expositor of the views of the Antichrist. Despite the widespread acceptance of this ancient heresy, Servetus asserted that the forces of evil "did not prevail until the Spirit of the Dragon itself settled into the pontifical seat. There, at that time, was the consummate apostasy."12 The Spanish radical was not certain when exactly the Papacy became the seat of evil, but, he speculated, "... it was truly conspicuous in stability and reign from the time of Sylvester and Constantine."13

As in the case of Eden where God withdrew from man in the face of evil, so here again, with the establishment of the power of the Antichrist as ruler of the temporal world and the Christian Church, Christ left man and the world of evil. "From the time soon after the ecumenical council, the Son of God was taken from us, the Church left desolated, and all the abominations were decreed in law."14 And so for the second time God yielded to evil, and all Christian history since Constantine is thus tainted and corrupted. The extent of this pollution extended past the power of temporal Rome, or the Church as the body of Christ, both of which Servetus denied, to the very core of Christian belief. Servetus explained: "Anyone truly knows the Pope to be the Antichrist and truly believes the Papistical Trinity, infant baptism, and the other sacraments of the Papacy to be teachings of the Demon."15

The world and Church bathe in the evil of Eden, a situation that can be rectified only by the second coming. Thus Christ's incarnation was only partially effective in the cause of human salvation. Servetus wrote: "If Christ was spiritually killed by the Papacy, as
John says, it follows then that there will be a spiritual resurrection in the future."\(^{16}\) The Parousia in turn depends upon ridding the world of the Antichrist, that force which twice forced the withdrawal of God. In determining how long the reign of the Antichrist might be, Servetus followed the Joachimite tradition that "The reign of the Antichrist would endure 1260 years" adding "after the end of which will be a heavenly war."\(^{17}\) To determine the temporal date of this debacle he added 325 years to represent the Council of Nicaea during the reign of Constantine. This computation led to the date 1585 as the time the reign of evil would end.\(^ {18}\) In this cataclysmic battle of Armageddon the true saints would come forward to do battle with evil. Servetus envisioned "Heaven and earth against the Dragon, and the Antichrist dislodged. Daniel said these fighters will be of the most holy."\(^ {19}\) Many times he warned that only the holy would remain after the final destruction,\(^ {20}\) and when writing to an unsympathetic John Calvin, Servetus stressed that man must take a stand against evil: "... it is men who will fight there, exposing their souls to death in blood, and for a testimony to Christ."\(^ {21}\)

Despite the prevalence of chiliastic speculation throughout the later middle ages and reformation period, Servetus' sources were the books of Daniel, John, and Revelation, and not the writings of Europe's great millenarian thinkers. He accepted from Revelation such notions as the Antichrist coming from the Abyss of the sea [Rev. 11:7, 13:1] the term Dragon [Rev. 13:11] and the identification of Rome as the locus of this evil force [Rev. 17:9]. Again, the idea of the Antichrist as a deceiver of the people can also be found in the Book of Revelation [13:14, 19:20]. These traces of influence are not very significant, however, in light of Servetus' general divergence from his Scriptural sources. Unlike the First Epistle of John [2:19] the Antichrist is not merely one who denies Christ as the true Messiah. Neither did Servetus follow the traditions of Mark 13:22 or Matthew 24:24 where the Antichrist is identified with false prophets. Similarly, though he was familiar with Paul's concept of the 'Man of Lawlessness, the Son of Perdition' of II Thessalonian 2:3-4,\(^ {22}\) who pretends he is divine and sets himself up in the Temple, Servetus' ideas surpassed such views. Rather than characterizing the Antichrist as a man, even a great magician, this being is the incarnation of Satan much as Christ was the incarnation of God. Indeed, in this regard, Servetus' views are actually closer to Manichaean dualism where two Gods are locked in cosmic combat. Significantly, this Spanish radical was familiar with ancient Persian thought.\(^ {23}\)

Servetus departed from yet other Christian traditions in presenting an Antichrist of near eternal proportions rather than a being who appears directly before the time of troubles. And while Servetus attacked the Gnostic Simon Magus as the source of the Antichrist's teachings, his own views concerning the origin of the Antichrist run parallel to Gnostic ideas of a world held captive by the evil God from whose control the world will be redeemed only with the fulfillment of time.\(^ {24}\) Servetus also diverged from orthodox orientations regarding the efficacy of Christ's passion. While the Son brought the good news of salvation, and over and agin Servetus asserted that man's only redemption from evil lay in Christ's celestial flesh,\(^ {25}\) yet it is the fulfillment of time which brings the transcendency of evil, and in both these senses the Spaniard's orientation was Gnostic.

While the dualistic elements in Servetus' thought distinguish him from many chiliastic strains, it is not this quality which characterizes the contribution he made to apocalyptic speculation. If Christ came to undo what Adam did because of the Serpent, the Antichrist is a new dispensation of Satan whose purpose is to keep man subservient to evil. And if
the incarnation of God on earth was an intensified divine effort to redeem man, the Anti-
christ represented an intensified effort on the part of Satan to retain his hegemony. The
world then has progressed from age to age as the combat between God and Satan has
heightened. Supposing that Servetus could note progress and change in the long battle be-
tween these potentates, and an intensification of their efforts, surely there must have been
some historical sense through which the entire conflict might be viewed and rationalized.
In short, was there a method or system through which the progress of the world toward
the last days might be understood? He concluded that there was, and in this sense the
Spanish radical might be compared to Joachim of Fiore. Servetus' apocalyptic thought
lay not in a vision of the future, but in a systematic presentation of the past, what might
be called the pre-history of the millenium. Like the Calabrian monk, Servetus sought
some patterned system through which the past led into the future. Unlike his Italian pre-
decessor, his system was not based upon three members of the Godhead where a past age
of Father, a present age of the Son, and future age of the Spirit bridged the chasm of time
between Eden and the future. Servetus built his system by reinterpreting the significance
of God's presence in the world through an exposition of progressive divine self expression
that accounted for God's withdrawal but eventual victory over Satan. Servetus concluded
that the pursuit of the millenium was not a human enterprise in the fullest sense, but a
divine undertaking originating not from Christ's death when He promised to return, but
from God's original withdrawal from Eden, and possibly even before that. The coming
Kingdom of the Saints might conceivably involve a rearrangement of social-economic con-
ditions and status, but more importantly, the future would bring a total divine presence
in the universe, without an equivalent evil force.

How then did Servetus see the divine past? The Spanish radical observed different
names being used in reference to God in the Old Testament, with each expressing to man
some aspect of His being. If these various names were analyzed their meaning would con-
tribute to understanding the different phases constituting human history since these ap-
pelations existed in a progressive sequence. He wrote about the name El Shaddai for
instance: "For God appeared to the patriarchs and was known under the name of El
Shaddai. And from the meaning of these names in this passage it is ascertained that far
more is conveyed through the name Jebova, for Shaddai comes from the verb shod,
which means desolation as though He were a desolator, or able to lay all waste ... Like-
wise, El means strong and powerful, whence El Shaddai, as though He were a mighty deso-
lator and under this name He first was manifested to Abraham ..." Servetus found
names other than El Shaddai such as Elobim, Jebova, Adonai, Sabaotb, and Oz, and
each name granted a degree of knowledge about God and was used to establish a progres-
sive sense of revelation. Each term then also initiated something of a new phase in human
understanding and history. As an example, Servetus wrote the following concerning the
change of knowledge from the time of Abraham to that of Moses, or, from the time of El
Shaddai to the time of Jebova. "Therefore, although I have appeared to them [patriarchs]
under this name [El Shaddai] and though they have realized that I have laid waste Sodom
and Gomorah, yet they have not known hitherto that I am omnipotent, [they] have not
known me under the name Jebova." In retrospect it would appear that God manifested
Himself in varying degrees to different people at different times, or as Servetus summed
up: ' God spoke differently to Noah, differently to Avimelech, differently to Job, differ-
ently to Nineveh, and differently to others.'
It follows that Servetus’ findings must be twofold to account not only for God’s activity within the world, but that of Satan as well for both potentates played an equivalent role in human affairs. Thus, if God employed names to describe His qualitative presence to man, so too did the evil one use his various names that he too might be adored and understood by man. Servetus cited such epithets as “Bel, Baal, Baalpehor, Astorot, Dagan, the Queen of the Heavens, Theraphim, Ellim, Moloch, and others”,31 and spent several pages describing these names of Satan which ancient man venerated as God. *Bel* for instance signified confusion and was first used during the construction of the Tower of Babel,32 while *Astorot* was a human fertility Goddess.33 The greatest evil, however, was associated with the name *Moloch* to whom the young were sacrificed,34 and Servetus pointed out how Satan, in his own devious way, continued this practice through the institution of infant baptism. He wrote: “Infants are offered in baptism with a great wailing of applause, just as they were offered to Moloch to the sound of trumpets.”35 The Spaniard believed the continuity of rites and rituals from earlier times through to the present was not coincidental and for this reason he went to great pains to show how use of candles, images, etc. were common to both ancient as well as contemporary worship of Satan. The conclusion for Servetus was quite obvious. “If you study all the Gods of all the peoples, you will discover Rome in them all.”36 Thus both God and Satan have revealed themselves to man in various forms, and throughout the ages have been easily confused.

It would appear that Servetus destroyed any thread of unity to Scripture for the separate vignettes of the Bible are reduced to separate glances of evil or divinity. Actually, he was able to discern five overall phases extending from before Eden to the end of time. The first period began before creation, where no proper name or term for God would in any sense be suitable. “It is to be premised that God is in all ways incomprehensible, unimaginable; nor can we form any conception of God Himself unless He adapts Himself to us under some form which we are capable of perceiving.”37 It is in this first age that God refers to Himself as *El Shaddai* when in contact with Abraham, and other names when dealing with other people. All these aliases taken together can give but a partial glimpse of His true being. This process was rationalized and systematized in the second phase. “Second, He, out of the mere good pleasure of His will determined to manifest Himself to the world . . . and thus at the time of the Law He was manifested to all people.”38 As we have already seen, the message conveyed through the use of the appellation *Jehova* at the time of the Law was that God was of an omnipotent nature. The third age was a refinement of the second, where “He manifested Himself to the prophets through His oracle more clearly. . .”39

The fourth stage was the incarnation. “Fourthly, from what has been said above learn what has been clearly and distinctly manifested to us, for the oracle has come to be flesh and we have seen Him.”40 While this last phase has completed the earlier ones in that the vision of God has progressed from total incomprehensibility to total revelation, yet God’s universal plans for the cosmos could not yet have been completed since the incarnation of God was accompanied by the incarnation of Satan in the form of the Antichrist. Moreover, as we have seen, in this second confrontation between God and the Devil, Christ withdrew in the face of the Antichrist, and at least by the time of Constantine and Sylvester was no longer present within the Church. To the degree that Christ has withdrawn, the purpose of the incarnation of God remains unfulfilled and unsatisfied. Thus, Servetus
could write: “After the glorification of the Antichrist, a new glorification of Christ is necessary.”41

From where would the new glorification come? A new era in divine history would be initiated after the fourth when “[Archangel] Michael will be roused, standing up for the children of the people of God, and it will be a time of great turmoil.”42 This new age, due to have begun in 1585, would end past periods of history and fulfill them at the same time. If in the first three ages God’s potential and self definition were partially exhibited to man, in the fourth phase the hope and possibility of salvation from sin was made possible through Christ’s good news and celestial flesh. Evil, however, still existed, and only with the fifth era would Satan be destroyed making possible an even greater glory than previously attainable. Servetus wrote: “We are truly made Gods. By participation in the deity of Christ we are made true participants in the divine nature.”43

As far as Servetus knew, he alone realized what was to come about the he identified with the Archangel Michael. On the frontpage of his major work Servetus inscribed in Hebrew and in Greek: “And at that time the Archangel Michael will rise...”. Indeed, the name of this work is the Restitution of Christianity which the author felt he could bring about. Writing to Calvin, this Spanish visionary observed: “You take offense that I mingle in this fight of Michael and desire that all Godly men should do so.”44 There can be no doubt that Servetus saw himself as one of Daniel’s ‘most holy fighters’ and a true servant of the coming age. All the signs from the books of Daniel and Revelation had been fulfilled and all the ancient empires which were to rule before the time of Michael had passed except the Papacy. By Servetus’ count, the Assyrians, Chaldeans, Medians, Persians, Greeks, Roman, and recently, Constantinople had fallen.45 The Church was torn apart by factionalism and division, with Fransiscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians at each others throats,46 just as the ancient Church before Constantine had been rent into factions. Indeed, Servetus could list sixty signs of the Antichrist’s presence which were near being fulfilled.47 If Rome was still intact, certainly by the middle of the sixteenth century it appeared that would not long be the case, and surely Michael was already girding himself to do battle with the Antichrist. Realizing that only the saints would remain after Armageddon and the responsibility this placed upon his shoulders, he wrote to Abel Poupin, a minister in Geneva “Woe, Woe, Woe, this is the third letter that I have written to you that you may know better. I will not write again.”48 Ironically, while the year 1585 did not bring more than the usual number of floods, epidemics, and plagues, Servetus’ vision of the future was correct on at least this one last point, and he never did warn Minister Poupin again. In 1553 in Geneva, he was burnt at the stake for heresy.

Kent State University

Notes


2 For a complete listing of Servetus’ theological writings as well as medical and astrological tracts, see the bibliography at the end of Roland Bainton’s fine biography, Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus. Boston, 1953.


4 See the following for a discussion of Servetus’ relationship to developing Unitarianism.

I refer here to Norman Cohn’s *Pursuit of the Millennium* New York, 1961.

Michael Servetus, *Restitutio Christianismi*, (Vienne, 1553) 1f. 448, 463.

*ibid.*, 1f. 399-400.

*ibid.*, 1f. 360.

*ibid.*, 1f. 385.

*ibid.*, 390, 374, et alia.

*ibid.*, 1f. 385.

*ibid.*, 1f. 399-400.

*ibid.*, 1f. 366.

*ibid.*

*ibid.*, 1f. 670.

*ibid.*, 1f. 461.

*ibid.*, 1f. 395.

*ibid.*, 1f. 395, 666. At no point was Servetus explicit concerning the exact date of the end of the world, but he did begin the count of 1260 years from the time of Sylvester and Constantine. The base date of 306 is unlikely for while Constantine began his reign in that year, Sylvester only became pope in 314, which would put the end of the world in 1574. A preferable date to begin the count, however, is 325, establishing the end of time in 1585. Servetus wrote (1f. 666) that the period of 1260 years commenced from a time when horrible dogmas such as the Trinity (1f. 670) were made into law, which might signify the ecumenical council meeting in Nicaea in 325.

*ibid.*, 1f. 668.

*ibid.*, 1f. 398, 461.

*ibid.*, 1f. 628.

*ibid.*, 1f. 395, 432-3.

*ibid.*, 1f. 130-131 and following pages.


As early as 1531 Servetus was familiar with Joachim of Fiore, whose Trinitarian views were cited in the early *Concerning the Errors of the Trinity* (Hagenau, 1531) 1f. 39a. Servetus may have been influenced by other sources, however, such as Sebastian Franck. The latter, in a letter to Companus wrote: "I am fully convinced that after the death of the apostles, the external Church of Christ with its gifts and sacraments vanished from the earth and withdrew into heaven, and is now hidden in spirit and in truth, and for these past fourteen hundred years there has existed no true Church and no efficacious sacraments." J.G. Schellhorn, Amoenitates literariae (1729) xi. pp. 59-61. Such views are indeed reminiscent of Servetus’ own views.

Michael Servetus, *Concerning the Errors of the Trinity*, (Hagenau, 1531) 1f. 106b.

*ibid.*, 1f. 96b-102b. *Restitution*, 1f. 125 and following.

*ibid.*, 1f. 101a.

Restitution. 1f. 325.

*ibid.*, 1f. 466.

*ibid.*

*ibid.*, 1f. 467.

*ibid.*, 1f. 468.

*ibid.*

*ibid.*, 1f. 366.

*ibid.*, 1f. 119a.

*ibid.*

*ibid.*

*ibid.*, 1f. 119b.

Restitution. 1f. 461.

*ibid.*, 1f. 667-668.

*ibid.*, 1f. 196.

*ibid.*, 1f. 628.

*ibid.*, 1f. 405.

*ibid.*, 1f. 463-4.

*ibid.*, 1f. 664-670.