Divine Anatomy

Classifying the Christology of Michael Servetus

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Introduction

Michael Servetus (1511?–1553) is the most famous anti-Trinitarian martyr in history. While everyone agrees he denied orthodox Nicene-Chalcedonian Trinitarianism, attempts to classify his own theology remain contentious. Diverse traditions claim him: Oneness Pentecostal theologian David K. Bernard heralds him as a proto-modalist[1]; Unitarian Universalists celebrate him as a forerunner of Enlightenment rationalism[2]; and Jehovah's Witnesses cite his anti-Trinitarian polemics[3]. During his lifetime, inquisitors accused him of mutually exclusive heresies, including Arianism, Sabellianism, Nestorianism, and Photinianism.

Nineteenth-century Harvard Unitarian theologian Andrew Norton lamented that Servetus's "opinions on the subject of the person of our savior... are not always intelligible, and his meaning does not always seem to be such as could be clearly explained."[4] Harvard church historian Ephraim Emerton similarly wrote that "Servetus's manner of expressing himself is confusing and intricate to the last degree… To those who have studied him, even sympathetically, his thought remains to a great degree enigmatical."[5]

Twentieth-century books, such as Hunted Heretic by Roland Bainton, tend to be motivated by a liberal focus on his persecution and pleas for religious toleration but don't have much interest in the full depth of his actual theology.[6] To others, he mainly serves as a cudgel with which to hammer the reputation of John Calvin. Those who might be more interested in dense christological philosophy tend to overlook him due to his heretical reputation.

This paper seeks to provide a systematic re-examination of Michael Servetus's Christological writings. By analyzing his mature Christology in his magnum opus, Christianismi Restitutio (1553), we attempt to classify him according to historically recognized theological categories.

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[1] David K. Bernard, The Oneness of God (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1983), 236–38.
[2] Earl Morse Wilbur, A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and Its Antecedents (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), 49–75.
[3] Cited in Norman L. Geisler and Chad V. Meister, eds., Reasons for Faith: Making a Case for the Christian Faith (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 172.
[4] Andrew Norton, "Life of Michael Servetus," The General Repository and Review 4, no. 1 (1813): 35.
[5] Ephraim Emerton, "Calvin and Servetus," Harvard Theological Review 2, no. 2 (April 1909): 145.
[6] Roland H. Bainton, Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus, 1511–1553 (1953; repr., Providence, RI: Blackstone Editions, 2011).

Biography

Michael Servetus (Miguel Serveto) was born in northeastern Spain around 1509–1511. His family was devoutly Catholic and his father was a tax official. They provided him with an exceptional education. Around age twenty, he apprenticed under Juan de Quintana, confessor to Emperor Charles V. In 1530, he attended Charles V's coronation in Bologna, visited Pope Clement VII in the Vatican, and witnessed Philip Melanchthon's defense of Martin Luther's theology at the Diet of Augsburg. Disillusioned by Catholic extravagance and energized by personal Bible study, Servetus burst onto the Protestant scene with two radical treatises: *De Trinitatis Erroribus* (1531) and *Dialogorum de Trinitate* (1532).

The backlash caused him to fear for his life so he adopted the alias "Michel de Villeneuve" and lived as a "Nicodemite"—a clandestine Protestant outwardly practicing Catholicism. He studied at the University of Paris and became a preeminent physician. A relentlessly curious autodidact, he mastered anatomy, mathematics, geography, astrology, alchemy, ancient languages, Biblical textual criticism, translation, Renaissance Neoplatonism, and more.

Having finalized his theology in secret, he initiated a correspondence with John Calvin, which quickly turned hostile. When Servetus printed his magnum opus, *Christianismi Restitutio* (1553), Calvin took notice and exposed Servetus's identity to the French Catholic Inquisition. He was quickly arrested but escaped. For reasons that remain historically enigmatic, he surfaced in Geneva. Recognized at church, he was thrown into a Genevan dungeon, repeatedly interrogated face-to-face by Calvin, and convicted of heresy. On October 27, 1553, Servetus was burned at the stake with pages of his book used as kindling. Calvin sought to destroy all remaining copies of his book, of which only three originals are known to survive.[7]

Theological and Philosophical Influences

Throughout his life, Servetus enjoyed direct access to the flood of texts unleashed by the printing press. His temperament was oriented towards synthesis and integration, bringing together diverse influences into a unified intellectual system. These six sources shaped his worldview and are important for understanding his context:

- **Catholic Tradition & Scholasticism:** Ironically, despite rejecting Catholic orthodoxy, scholastic philosophy was his most formative intellectual framework. Servetus demonstrated command of Thomas Aquinas, Peter Abelard, William of Ockham and

[7] For comprehensive biographical accounts of Servetus's life, trial, and execution, see Roland H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus, 1511–1553* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953); Marian Hillar, *The Case of Michael Servetus (1511–1553): The Historiography of an Execution* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997); and Peter Zerner and Peter Hughes, introduction to *On the Trinity and the Bible*, by Michael Servetus, trans. Peter Zerner and Peter Hughes (Providence, RI: Blackstone Editions, 2023). The three surviving original copies of *Christianismi Restitutio* (1553) are housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris), the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (Vienna), and the Edinburgh University Library.

more. Augustine and Peter Lombard were among his most cited authors in *Christianismi Restitutio*, serving as standard-bearers against whom he directed his critiques.

- **Ante-Nicene Patristics:** Seeking to restore primitive Christianity, Servetus privileged ante-Nicene fathers—such as Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen—believing their theology predated fourth-century corruption. (His citations, however, included works now recognized as pseudepigraphal.)
- **Jewish Philosophy & Rabbinics:** In sharp contrast to mainstream Christian history, Servetus treated Jewish sources and interpretations as authoritative over and against Christian ones. He relied heavily on Philo of Alexandria to reconstruct the philosophical milieu of the New Testament era. He also references the Tanakh, medieval commentators like Maimonides, and the Kabbalah.
- **Classical Philosophy & Florentine Neoplatonism:** Servetus drew from Greek philosophy spanning the Pre-Socratics to Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonists. His expertise in Galen's medical philosophy directly informed how his anatomical discoveries intersected his pneumatology. Permeating his metaphysics was the Renaissance Neoplatonism of Marsilio Ficino and the Hermetic corpus.
- **Islamic Philosophy & the Quran:** Raised in post-Reconquista Spain, Servetus read the Quran and Islamic Philosophers. He argued the doctrine of the Trinity was an unbiblical obstacle preventing the conversion of Muslims and Jews to the true Christianity.
- **The Protestant Reformers:** Having met several key figures personally, Servetus actively engaged the writings and arguments of contemporary reformers, including Luther, Melanchthon, Bucer, Zwingli, Oecolampadius, and Calvin.

Above all, however, Scripture was his ultimate authority. Deeply fluent in Hebrew and Greek—and having edited a major edition of Santes Pagnino's Latin Bible in 1542—Servetus cited the Bible far more than any other text. His love of the scriptures is evident on every page.

Metaphysics & Terminology

Much of the confusion surrounding Servetus stems from the difficulty of grasping his idiosyncratic metaphysics and his radical redefinition of standard Trinitarian vocabulary. However, once several key concepts are clarified, his system reveals remarkable internal coherence.

The *Prisca Theologia*

Servetus was deeply influenced by the Renaissance revival of Neoplatonism and the Hermetic corpus, central to which was the concept of prisca theologia ("ancient theology"):

> *"From the beginning of the world this was the accepted teaching about the wisdom of God…This doctrine… was taught to the Greeks by the Chaldeans and the Egyptians. This is what Job, Moses, David, Solomon, and others taught in holy scripture. The same thing was taught to all the Greeks, from Orpheus to Plato, by*

Zoroaster and [Hermes] Trismegistus. That, in the first patterns of the world, the shining forms of all things were contained in the Word of God"[8]

Modern commentators sometimes mistake this stance for early religious pluralism. Servetus was not reducing Jesus to merely one teacher among many; rather, he believed a primordial divine philosophy had fragmented and dimmed over time, a common idea within Renaisance Neoplatonism. This contrasted Servetus from other Protestant Reformers, who viewed philosophy with suspicion and sought to strip away speculative metaphysics in favor of textual exegesis. For Servetus, proper scriptural interpretation required true philosophy.

Divine Archetypes

Central to Servetus's cosmology was the conviction that the future shape of all creation resided eternally within God as the "form of all forms" (*forma omniformis*):

"The images, or representations, of all things were in God from eternity – in the wisdom of God itself, in the Word itself – as they were shining in the world of archetypes. For God saw all things in himself, by his own light"[8]

For Servetus, divine Wisdom (Sophia) and the divine Word (Logos) were synonymous—the eternal, radiant archetype containing the form and logic of the cosmos. In this, Servetus drew heavily on the first-century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria:

"Just as the city formed beforehand in the mind of the architect has no location outside, but is stamped in the mind of the master builder, so the world of ideas can have no other location than the divine Logos which ordered these things."[9]

Yet for Servetus, the divine Logos was far more than a static architectural blueprint in the mind of God; it was an active, energetic entity permeating the universe.

The Spirit, Word, Light, Glory, and Wisdom of God

While some Neoplatonists imagined the realm of ideas as unapproachably transcendent, Servetus adopted a more Stoic physics, understanding God's Word not as an immaterial abstraction, but as a subtle divine substance active within creation. As New Testament scholar Troels Engberg-Pedersen notes regarding Stoic influence on early Christian metaphysics:

"It all hangs together in terms of the activity of the (logos-) pneuma when this is understood cosmologically as a (cognitive and) material entity along Stoic lines that literally and concretely acts on all involved.

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[8] Servetus, *On the Mysteries of the Word* (Book IV of *Christianismi Restitutio*), trans. Zerner and Hughes, 180.

[9] Philo of Alexandria, *De Opificio Mundi*, 20.

The Stoics claimed that 'the logos of God', which descends as far as human beings… is nothing other than material spirit (pneuma somatikon)'."[10]

For Servetus, God's Word, Wisdom, Spirit, Light, and Glory are different facets of the same underlying divine reality—a vaporous, luminous dew permeating and animating the cosmos. Therefore God's Logos or foreknowledge is not merely abstract, but rather an active, pneumatic breath operating within reality:

"There is one primary substance of these three elements, which is corporeal, spiritual, and shing with light. In one mode of divine dispensation, the elementary substance of the cloud becomes a tangible solid body; in another it becomes a breath of wind… In either mode he was always light –truly without any illusion."[11]

Modern Biblical Unitarians often view Jesus as pre-existing solely in God's plan or foreknowledge. Servetus agreed, but went a step further: he understood this foreknowledge—the Logos—as a real, pneumatic energy dynamically working and appearing in creation prior to Christ's birth.

Substance

One persistent stumbling block in understanding Servetus is his idiosyncratic definition of "substance" (Latin: *substantia /* Greek: *ousia*). Readers approaching Servetus through the lens of classical Catholic or Protestant theology almost instinctively assume he uses the term in its standard Trinitarian sense—namely, as an immaterial, abstract metaphysical essence shared co-equally by divine persons. However, for Servetus, substantia denotes a concrete, divine reality—God's spirit, word, and wisdom– understood as a sublimely ethereal, pneumatic "stuff" permeating creation:

"The spirit was coming forth with the word; by speaking, God was breathing. The substance of the word and the spirit was the same, but the mode was different."[12]

Substance is what unifies Word and Spirit: they are not two distinct metaphysical persons, but two operational aspects of the same divine stuff. The Word is the informational component, while the Spirit is the animating wind that carries the information.

Shekinah

The clearest example Servetus provides of this divine substance prior to the birth of Jesus is the glory cloud of God (Hebrew: *Shekinah*). When the Israelites witnessed the pillar of fire in the wilderness, Servetus argues they were not viewing a temporary miraculous illusion,

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[10] Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *John and Philosophy: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 34, 62n.
[11] Servetus, *On the Holy Spirit* (Book V of *Christianismi Restitutio*), trans. Zerner and Hughes, 29.
[12] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 1:231.

but the uncreated substance of God Himself making itself visible within physical space:

> *“The cloud, the fire, and the light were all the same substance. The cloud was not… elemental, of dark, created matter; rather it was super-elemental, of uncreated matter, shining from within. God was in the fire, and the fire was God himself.”*[13]

Servetus almost struggles to bring his readers along. The Exodus Shekinah was a visible, active reality already within the cosmos, yet it was not an ordinary cloud or fog. It was "super-elemental"—a heavenly, hyper-real divine material present in space and time. This distinction between elemental and super-elemental is Servetus’s distinction between created and uncreated, however, even the uncreated is elemental of a sort and can appear within our world. Most importantly and shockingly, this cloudy substance was none other than God himself.

Person

Another key term in Servetus’s theology is "person" (Latin: *persona* / Greek: *prosopon*). His system becomes far clearer to modern readers when persona is understood in its original classical sense rather than its contemporary psychological or scholastic meaning. Servetus writing to Melanchton rejected Boethius’s definition of a person as an "incommunicable individual substance," calling it a “fiction and an abuse of the language”. Instead:

> *“I say that the 'Person is an appearance, a face, or the very entity itself that is seen.' That is how the term person is understood among all the Hebrews, Greeks, and Latins, and using the same meaning, the ancients said that God was a person."*[14]

Servetus reclaimed the classical definition of *persona* as a visible presentation, mask, or manifestation. When God manifested in the pillar of fire, that physical manifestation was a *persona* of God. Likewise, Jesus is the ultimate *persona* of God through whom the divine becomes visible:

> “*In the invisible Father, there was the visible Word, as Tertullian teaches in accordance with Irenæus... Such was the manifestation of God that not even the angels could perceive anything about God if it were not for the fact that he became manifest to them through the light of the Word.”*[15]

Citing ante-Nicene fathers, Servetus argued that God the Father in himself remains inherently invisible and imperceptible, even to angels. To communicate, God projects himself outward through distinct *personae*—visible forms composed of his radiant substance.

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[13] Servetus, *On the Mysteris of the Word* (Book III of *Christianismi Restitutio*), trans. Zerner and Hughes, 68.

[14] Michael Servetus, "Apology Regarding the Mystery of the Trinity and the Teaching of the Ancients to Philip Melanchthon and His Colleagues," in The Restoration of Christianity: An English Translation of Christianismi Restitutio (1553), trans. Christopher A. Hoffman and Marian Hillar (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2015), 61.

[15] Servetus, "Apology to Melanchthon," 109

Christ and Wisdom Christology

Servetus wrote extensively to restore the term "Christ" to its literal meaning—"anointed one"—against contemporary Catholic and Protestant misunderstandings. However, he also employed the term in distinctively non-traditional ways. Because the human Jesus Christ is the ultimate embodiment of God's Word, Wisdom, and substance, Servetus frequently used the name "Christ" to refer to God's Wisdom and Word even before its fleshly incarnation in the Virgin Mary. This practice strikingly anticipates what modern biblical scholarship terms "Wisdom Christology." Renowned Pauline scholar Dr. James Dunn observed:

> *"We should probably see here a Hellenistic Jewish Christian writer taking up this kind of thinking and using it to describe Christ, quite probably with a conscious dependence on Stoic language... The assertion is that Christ... is to be understood as the cosmic presence of God: that is to say, the action and manifestation of God which in one sense is inescapable throughout the cosmos has been focused in the man Jesus… Christ embodied God's creative energy in as complete a way as it is possible for the cosmos to perceive."*[16]

Though Dunn was commenting on 1 Corinthians 1:24, his description fits Servetus remarkably well. Like Engberg-Pedersen, Dunn connects this theology to Stoic physics and Jewish Wisdom literature—specifically Philo of Alexandria.

Dr. Dustin Smith concisely defines Wisdom Christology as "the early Church's repeated attempts at illustrating Jesus as the embodiment of God's wisdom and God's word."[17] Expanding on this framework, Dr. Jerry Wierwille highlights the concept of protological speech:

> *"Therefore, as Christ is the man in whom God appointed to have His creative wisdom dwell, he is seen as the bearer of the whole purpose of creation and the complete embodiment of God's wisdom. And thus the author speaks of Christ figuratively in protological terms—that means speaking of him as though he's in the beginning as the one who created the heaven and the earth"* [18]

Servetus employed "Christ" in exactly this protological sense—attributing the ancient works and manifestations of divine Wisdom to "Christ," even though the human Jesus had not yet come into historical existence:

> *"From another perspective, you could say that that which formerly was done through your spirit, if your spirit preceded the flesh, was done through you."*[19]

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[16] James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1989), 193.
[17] Dustin R. Smith, A Systematic Theology of the Early Church (Boise, ID: Integrity Syndicate, 2025), 263.
[18] Jerry Wierwille, "Jerry Wierwille - Intertextuality and Interpretation of Hebrews 1," YouTube video, 40:44, posted by "Unitarian Christian Alliance," June 4, 2022, https://www.youtube.com.
[19] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book II, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 121

Protological speech illuminates the key to understanding some of Servetus's otherwise perplexing passages:

> *"the final mystical implication, in which we recognize the mystery of Christ, is that the true Jehovah was the word among men, the person of Christ represented by the angel… having then the name Jehovah, rained fire from the great supreme Jehovah, the Father of our lord, Jesus Christ."* [20]

While readers might misinterpret "the person of Christ" here as an eternal second person of a Trinity, this was not Servetus's view. Rather, the Old Testament angel appearing to Abraham was a *persona* of the Christ-spirit—a visible manifestation of the wisdom that would ultimately become Jesus.

Theology

With Servetus's metaphysics and terminology established, we now turn to his core theological framework to clarify and classify his Christology.

One God, The Father

Servetus fiercely defended strict monotheism, insisting that there is only one undivided God: the Father.

> *"in the preaching of Paul and the other apostles never is anything heard but that there is one God, who is the Father and that Jesus Christ is his son."*[21]

> *"In every instance, Ignatius teaches openly without metaphor or sophism that God, the highest Father, is one and that Jesus Christ is His only begotten son."*[22]

Servetus frequently appeals to the simple clarity of both the New Testament and the early church fathers that God the Father is singular, and that this singular God has a unique human son, Jesus Christ. Conversely, Servetus fiercely attacked Trinitarians:

> *"But the tritheists have not entered on this path. Following an invisible path, they worship an unknown God, or, rather, a three-headed monster. Without realizing it, they dream about a three-headed Cerberus"*[23]

On this point, Servetus is consistent and unambiguous.

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[20] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book II, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 125
[21] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book III, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 152
[22] Servetus, "Apology to Melanchthon," 64
[23] Servetus, On the Holy Spirit (Book V of Christianismi Restitutio), trans. Zerner and Hughes, 29.

Pre-Existence

As previously noted, Servetus's use of "person" and "Christ" can give an untrained reader the impression he asserts the personal pre-existence of Jesus Christ. Interpreted through his own definitions, his rejection of Jesus's personal pre-existence becomes explicit:

> *"Therefore, I shall say with the scriptures 'once the Word, now the son' and 'once in the Word was the person of the son"*[24]

God's Word contained the archetypal blueprint of Jesus, establishing an identity between the Word and Christ. Yet strictly speaking, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, began to exist only inside Mary's womb. Servetus appeals to Jewish concepts of notional pre-existence to refute scholastic Trinitarianism:

> *"notice in what sense the Hebrews spoke: the messiah was 'from the beginning'. It is not in the manner of the trinitarian sophists, but because his person and visible form were subsisting in God. Hence Rabbi Igzhac Arama said regarding Genesis 'before the sun was created, the messiah's name was subsisting, and it was already sitting on the throne of God'. I wish that our sophists had kept this interpretation."*[25]

Servetus insisted that the title "Son" refers exclusively to the historical, begotten human being:

> *"The designation "son" applies to the man, because in the holy scripture the word son is always used of the man."*[26]

> *"The man is called the son because of the logic of genuine generation. Matthew and Luke thus teach us that the son is the engendered man, engendered in Mary and generated from the substance and power of God."*[27]

Jesus's sonship was a direct result of his divine conception in the Virgin Mary as a human. Prior to this, there is no son. This stands in direct contrast to the Trinitarian conception:

> *"This other metaphysical and invisible Son was invented afterwards due to misunderstood interpretation of the text of John"* [28]

Servetus rejected the orthodox doctrine of "eternal generation" as a post-biblical invention and a misunderstanding of the true Jewish notional understanding messianic pre-existence. Where scholastic theology posited two begettings—one eternal in heaven and one temporal on earth—Servetus recognized only one.

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[24] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book III, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 152
[25] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book III, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 190
[26] Servetus, "Apology to Melanchthon," 83
[27] Servetus, "Apology to Melanchthon," 93
[28] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book I, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 16

The Virgin Birth

It is difficult to overstate the centrality of the Virgin Birth in Servetus's Christology. Combining his pneumatic metaphysics with his mastery of human anatomy, Servetus attempts a complete account of how the Virgin conception happened:

> *"The man Jesus Christ is the Word of God, the voice of God that proceeds in substance from the mouth of God. Imagine your own voice issuing from your mouth as a cloud, overshadowing a woman, becoming fructifying dew, falling into her womb, and making her pregnant. In this way Christ was begotten in substance in Mary by the utterance of God."*[29]

Here Servetus presents God's Word and Spirit as a vaporous, dewy substance—likened to divine breath or male procreative seed. The uncreated divine substance that manifested as the Shekinah glory cloud physically entered Mary, coalescing with her human material to generate Jesus of Nazareth. On this basis, Servetus shockingly affirmed Mary's Catholic title Theotokos ("God-bearer"):

> *"Without any metaphor and without any manipulation of 'idioms,' Mary is really θεοτόκος [Theotokos], engendering God or mother of God because her son is truly God. He is an intervening intermediary sharing in the substance of both, a 'mediator between God and men'... blending in himself man and God."*[30]

As was his custom, Servetus reappropriated orthodox vocabulary through his own physical realism. Jesus's body is constitutionally and anatomically composed of two different kinds of substance – human and divine. This miraculous conception carried cosmic and eschatological implications:

> *"In Christ God united his own uncreated light with created light, and it was a single form– the lower elements are united in substance with the higher elements of the archetypal world… the recapitulation of all things is gathered as one in Christ. With the divine Word as the dew of Christ's begetting, intermingling with the created elements of the earth through the activity of the Spirit of God, the body of Christ came into existence… the same light was shared by both the body ad the spirit, and glorified the human elements taken from Mary"* [31]

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[29] Servetus, On the Trinity and the Bible (Book II of Christianismi Restitutio), trans. Zerner and Hughes, 161.
[30] Servetus, "Apology to Melanchthon," 94
[31] Servetus, On the Holy Spirit (Book V of Christianismi Restitutio), trans. Zerner and Hughes, 30

Echoing Ireneaus[32], God is joining together the lower elements of creation with the higher uncreated elements to bring about a unification of heaven and earth within the divine anatomy of Jesus Christ.

The Divinity of Jesus

While Servetus was condemned for many heresies, he was rarely accused of denying the divinity of Jesus. In the opening lines of *Christianismi Restitutio*, he articulated his three foundational propositions:

> *the following three statements are the plain and simple truth:*
> *1. this man is Jesus Christ*
> *2. this man is the son of God*
> *3. this man is God. - Restitutio*[33]

Frequently citing his favorite passage, Colossians 2:9 ("For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily"[34]), Servetus applied his physical realism to affirm even the Nicene keyword homoousios (consubstantial):

> *"The entire hypostasis, nature, and essence of God; the whole vision, adoration, and worship of God; all that God has exists substantially and bodily in Christ, as Christ is truly ὁμοούσιος (homoousios), truly consubstantial, with God the Father"*[35]

With a typical Severtian twist, he recasts *homoousius* to describe how Jesus's earthly body shares God's own substance.

> *"Christ, the true God, is possessed of God's divinity in its entirety, possessed of God's adoration, and vision. Just as the Father is the true God, so through the unique gift of His true divinity to His only son, He brought it about that Christ was made the true God."*[36]

Jesus's divinity is externally received from the Father, yet he is still "true God". While the person Jesus is not eternally divine, the divine substance that he has received is eternal. His divinity is far stronger than mere participation; He is essentially and irrevocably divine by composition. Consequently, Jesus is worthy of worship— not as an independent ultimate object,

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[32] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, bk. 3, chap. 18, sec. 7, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 1:448. See also bk. 5, chap. 14, sec. 1.
[33] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book I, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 5
[34] Col. 2:9 (King James Version).
[35] Servetus, On the Trinity and the Bible (Book II of Christianismi Restitutio), trans. Zerner and Hughes, 197
[36] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book I, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 23

but as the visible image through whom worship passes to the Father, echoing Basil the Great's principle that “the honor given to the image passes to the prototype.”[37]

Crucially for his classification, Servetus explicitly denounced "mere man" (psilanthropist) Christologies:

> “*The other heresy that soon followed was that of Ebion and Cerinthus who said that Jesus was a human being and nothing more and that he lacked divine substance and was nonexistent prior to Mary. To counter these John explained that Jesus came and was also previously the Word with God.”*[38]

Servetus was fundamentally at odds with the Socinian Unitarians who emerged shortly after his death. Consider the sharp contrast presented in the Socinian Racovian Catechism (1605):

> *Question: “But do you not acknowledge in Christ a divine, as well as a human nature or substance?”*
> *Answer: “If by the terms of divine nature or substance I am to understand the very essence of God, I do not acknowledge such a divine nature in Christ; for this were repugnant both to right reason and to the Holy Scriptures*[39]

Servetus would have found the Socinian denial of the substantial divinity of Jesus heretical.

The pneumatification of Jesus

If the Virgin Birth represents heavenly elements descending into earthly flesh, the resurrection of Jesus represents the earthly elements of his body elevated to heavenly glory:

> *“in the resurrection [Christ’s body] was substantially transformed just as on the mountain Christ’s transformation was seen... The form of Christ’s glorious body is divine light that is also to be communicated to us."*[40]

The lower elements of Jesus's physical body that he received from Mary were themselves transformed into glorified Spirit and Light—a tangible body such that Thomas could touch it, yet pneumatic reality such that Jesus’s spiritual body is truly present within all believers. The resurrected Jesus and the Holy Spirit share a fused identity. The Holy Spirit is now the active means by which the glorified Jesus remains immanently present to believers. This parallels the position of Sean Finnegan:

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[37] Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 18.45.
[38] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book I, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 26
[39] The Racovian Catechism, with Notes and Illustrations, Translated from the Latin, trans. Thomas Rees (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818), sec. 4, chap. 1, p. 51.
[40] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book IV, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 215

"[Jesus] is … in a new mode… the Advocate is a projection of Jesus. It's a way for Jesus to be here even though he's in heaven… The Advocate is the alter ego of Jesus Christ in his heavenly ministry." [41]

This theological conviction provided the direct context for Servetus's groundbreaking anatomical discovery: the pulmonary circulation of blood. Bravely breaking with Galenic medical orthodoxy, Servetus correctly detailed how blood flows from the heart's right side through the lungs for aeration before returning to the left side:

"*The vital spirit has its origin in the heart's left ventricle with the lungs particularly assisting in the generation of it... It is generated as a result of a mixing process that has occurred in the lungs, of inhaled air with worked, fine blood, which the heart's right ventricle communicates to the left. Moreover, this communication does not take place through the middle of the heart's wall, as is commonly held; rather, by a great mechanism fine blood is kept in motion from the right ventricle of the heart via a long passage through the lungs."*[42]

While the 13th-century Arab physician Ibn al-Nafis pre-dated Servetus in this discovery, Servetus arrived at it independently. Crucially, Servetus did not include this medical breakthrough as a scientific tangent; his primary purpose was explaining how the resurrected Christ's pneumatic substance physically enters human bodies to divinize the soul:

"In order that you may have a complete idea of the soul and the spirit, reader, at this point I shall add the divine philosophy, which you shall easily understand if you happen to be conversant in anatomy... The Holy Spirit is the very breath of Christ's mouth (John 20)... In fact, the very atmosphere which we breathe is made substantively one with our soul after it has been joined in its essence within our heart to our own vital spirit... Christ shares substantively with us his own vital, eternal spirit just as he does his own flesh."[43]

Believers breathe in the pneumatified Jesus through our lungs, into our heart, and into our soul. For Servetus, scientific anatomy was in direct service of seeking greater understanding of Christology. The study of medicine was an act of theology: human anatomy was divine, and the divine possessed an anatomy.

The Kingdom of Pneumatified Saints

Servetus envisioned the process of divine-human synthesis—initiated in Mary's womb and perfected in Christ's resurrection—as expanding outward to encompass all believers. Citing

[41] Sean Finnegan, "The Spirit As Christ's Alter Ego In John 14-16," YouTube video, 45:26, posted by "Unitarian Christian Alliance," April 27, 2026, https://www.youtube.com.
[42] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book V, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 242
[43] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book V, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 239

2 Peter 1:4[44], Servetus gave a full-throated endorsement of theosis (participatory human divinization):

> "As Peter says, by sharing in the deity of Christ, we truly become gods, true partakers of the divine nature. In a foreshadowing of this truth, God once said, 'I said you are gods.' The human being within us is God, from heaven, and of the substance of God. When you understand divine rengereation – heavenly regeneration – all this will be better understood. Then you will understand the heavenly human being within us"[45]

This physical divinization begins at believer's baptism. Servetus was a fierce critic of infant baptism, dating the Great Apostasy of the Church to the fourth-century embrace of pedobaptism, which he believed lacked the prerequisite of self-conscious faith necessary to receive the Holy Spirit. For Servetus, baptism initiates the literal indwelling of Christ's pneumatic particles:

> "*Consider the kind of substance Christ in heaven contains within himself today… By the power of the Resurrection, however, all the elements of his body and spirit are renewed, glorified, and made incorruptible. And Christ shares all these things with us in [the sacraments] of baptism and the Lord's Supper."*[46]

What baptism begins, the Eucharist continues:

> *"If it is true nourishment, it is assimilated into one substance in order that the person who is nourished be made one with Christ in substance. Christ truly nourishes us there... making himself one in substance with our soul."*[47]

Jesus Christ blesses the Eucharist with His physical presence within the elements, providing literal, substantive nourishment for our souls. Servetus held a remarkably high view of the sacraments, strongly criticizing Zwingli and other Reformers whom he viewed as stripping them of divine reality. Yet simultaneously, he rejected the scholastic metaphysical mechanics of transubstantiation that undergirded Catholic theology. Drawing from the rich mystical traditions of the Catholic Church in his native Spain, Servetus also had a deeply mystical and contemplative dimension to his thought:

> *"Those who are truly reborn in him see Christ dwelling deep within themselves. As Paul says, this inward vision gloriously transforms us into Christ (2 Cor 3). To the inner self, the light of the face of Christ is eternal glory, and the enjoyment of divine blessedness"*[48]

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[44] 2 Peter 1:4 (King James Version).
[45] Servetus, On the Holy Spirit (Book V of Christianismi Restitutio), trans. Zerner and Hughes, 79
[46] Servetus, On the Holy Spirit (Book V of Christianismi Restitutio), trans. Zerner and Hughes, 55
[47] Michael Servetus, "On the Lord's Supper" (De Cœna Domini), in The Restoration of Christianity: An English Translation of Christianismi Restitutio (1553), vol. 2, trans. Christopher A. Hoffman and Marian Hillar (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 206.
[48] Servetus, On the Mysteries of the Word (Book 3 of Christianismi Restitutio), trans. Zerner and Hughes, 62

Crucially, Christ's redemptive power does not remain confined to human souls, but flows outward to transfigure all created matter:

> "*The old earth compared to the new is shadow and darkness, tohu and bohu. The new earth has been glorified as Christ's flesh, and our flesh will be transformed and made new in its likeness. In Christ's very flesh and in his spirit there are heavenly elements that make heaven new.*"[49]

Servetus did not follow pagan Neoplatonists who envisioned the cosmos ultimately absorbing back into an impersonal "One," as souls escaped entrapment in matter. He instead envisioned God's loving embrace saturating physical matter with His own divine light. Here the theology of Servetus shows shocking similarities with Maximus the Confessor who also had a cosmic vision in his Christology where Christ "united earth and heaven" and "created nature to the uncreated... so that God may be all in all."[50] The transformation of human anatomy was merely the seed for the ultimate transfiguration of the entire universe, culminating in a dynamic Kingdom of divinized human beings rule over a spiritually infused Kingdom where God is finally "all in all."

Classifying Servetus

When attempting to classify Servetus into historically recognized categories, we first acknowledge that he might not belong in any of these categories. Even though his thought is undeniably idiosyncratic, evaluating his writings against recognized theological traditions reveals clear structural patterns.

Heretical Trinitarian

Some scholars have proposed the counterintuitive label of "heretical Trinitarian." In his early work, *De Trinitatis Erroribus* (1531), Servetus appeared to seek the reform of Trinitarianism rather than outright replacement. However, in his mature magnum opus, *Christianismi Restitutio*, his goals are more radical. Servetus routinely mocked Trinitarianism and denied an eternal triune Godhead. His use of traditional vocabulary was re-appropriated and radically redefined. Therefore, classifying him as any form of Trinitarian is simply not accurate.

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[49] Michael Servetus, "Dialogue One," in Two Dialogues on the Divine Trinity, in The Restoration of Christianity: An English Translation of Christianismi Restitutio (1553), vol. 1, trans. Christopher A. Hoffman and Marian Hillar (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 303.

[50] Maximus the Confessor, Ambiguum 41 (1308A–1312A), in On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor, trans. Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 53–62.

Arian

Inquisitors and Reformers frequently branded Servetus an "Arian," though in the sixteenth century the term functioned largely as a catch-all smear for anti-Trinitarians. Historically, Arianism posits that the Son is a created, semi-divine spirit who pre-existed creation. Servetus was well aware of Arius's teachings and explicitly rejected them.[51] Paradoxically, Servetus's Christology was both too human and too divine to be Arian: he insisted on a genuine human Son with no personal pre-existence, while affirming that Jesus's body was composed of uncreated divine substance—both of which Arians denied.

Modalist

Modalism remains the most common historical classification attached to Servetus. His insistence that Word and Spirit are operational modes of the one God, alongside his unyielding defense of divine unity, strongly resembles modalistic theology. Indeed, modern Oneness Pentecostals frequently claim him. Yet classical modalism also fails to capture his system: Servetus maintained that the historical Jesus possessed his own human consciousness and a filial relationship with the Father. Servetus was also aware of historical modalism and condemned it as "one with three names". He frequently references Tertullian's anti-modalist treatise "Against Praxaeus", always siding with Tertullian[52]. Despite some strong and note-worthy similarity, his belief in the unique human personality of Jesus prevents a classification of modalism.

Unitarian

If "Unitarianism" is defined strictly by Socinian psilanthropy ("mere-man" Christology), Servetus does not fit, as he explicitly condemned Ebionite doctrines for denying Christ's intrinsic divinity.[53] Yet Servetus strongly aligns with core Unitarian commitments: he affirmed the absolute Monarchy of God the Father, the distinct human personhood of Jesus, the non-pre-existence of the Son, and the impersonality of the Holy Spirit. Conversely, Servetus maintained that Jesus is "true God," homoousios with the Father, and hailed Mary as Theotokos ("God bearer")—statements that push well beyond traditional Unitarian boundaries.

Historical Comparison to Monarchians

To help us out of this jam, a historical comparison with fourth-century Monarchianism proves especially enlightening. Servetus's closest precursors were Marcellus of Ancyra and his disciple Photinus of Galatia. Marcellus was condemned by his contemporaries as a modalist (a label he rejected), while Photinus was condemned as a psilanthropist. Marcellus taught:

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[51] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book I, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 34
[52] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book IV, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 200
[53] Servetus, Restoration of Christianity, Book I, trans. Hoffman and Hillar, 26

> *He created me [human Jesus] … through the virgin Mary, through whom God chose to unite human flesh to his Word.*[54]

Like Servetus, Marcellus taught that the uncreated Logos "expanded" into creation, and that the title "Son" applied strictly to the human Jesus born of Mary when united with the Word. Although no writings by Photinus survive, he was anathematized at the Council of Sirmium (351). Several anathemas from Sirmium were clearly targeted at Photinian and Marcellan doctrine:

> *Anathema 5: Whoever says that according to foreknowledge the Son is before Mary and not that, generated from the Father before ages, he was with God… let him be anathema.*
>
> *Anathema 7: Whoever says that the essence of God being dilated made the Son, or will name the dilation of his essence Son, let him be anathema.*[55]

These fourth-century anathemas bear a striking resemblance to Servetus's statements twelve centuries later. Philip Melanchthon explicitly accused Servetus of being a Photinian[56]—a charge Servetus never denied. Because modern Biblical Unitarians frequently view Photinus as an early forerunner, Servetus's kinship with Marcellian and Photinian Christology suggests that standard definitions of "Unitarian" may be overly narrow if restricted solely to post-sixteenth-century Socinian models.

Conclusion

Servetus was perhaps the most intellectually ambitious thinker of the early Reformation—not content merely to revise Catholic dogma with biblical critiques, but imagining an entirely new Christocentric philosophical system. Ultimately, Servetus's unique theology forces a re-examination of the boundaries of Unitarianism itself. To accommodate him, the category must expand to include its most radical expression: a "super-high" Wisdom-Christology Biblical Unitarianism. Unitarian theology can thus be understood on a spectrum, with Socinian-style models on one end and Servetan Christology on the other. While no single historical category fits Servetus without qualification, Biblical Unitarianism comes closest—provided his pneumatic realism and monistic metaphysics are allowed to broaden our understanding of what Unitarian Christology can be.

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[54] Marcellus of Ancyra, Against Asterius, fr. 28, in Marcellus of Ancyra: Fragments; Pseudo-Marcellus: On the Holy Church, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 138.

[55] First Council of Sirmium (351), Anathemas 5 and 7, in Athanasius, De Synodis (On the Synods), 27, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd ser., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 4:464.

[56] Marian Hillar, introduction to "Apology Regarding the Mystery of the Trinity and the Teaching of the Ancients to Philip Melanchthon and His Colleagues," in The Restoration of Christianity: An English Translation of Christianismi Restitutio (1553), by Michael Servetus, trans. Christopher A. Hoffman and Marian Hillar (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2015), 47.

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