The Martyrdom of Michael Servetus.

A DISCOURSE SUGGESTED BY THE BLASPHEMY PROSECUTION OF 1883,

Delivered in the Free Christian Church, Colne,

BY THE

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"Shall Truth be silent because Error frowns."

YOUNG.

MICHAEL SERVETUS.

I AM sorry that in taking up the life of Michael Servetus I am perforce obliged to express my opinion of John Calvin. Many of my fellow-townsmen have been led to regard John Calvin as a source of credit to the Christian Church; they are looking up to him with that peculiar reverence given by the Catholic Church to some of the saints. Hero-worship is an attitude of the mind which ought not to be rudely handled. It ennobles far more than it debases: for when a hero is truly worshipped his vices are reverently forgotten, and only the nobler traits in his character and career are remembered. And I am sure it is so in the case of John Calvin. If therefore, I am compelled to-night to dwell upon foul traces of persecution which stain his history, I would not have the Calvinists of this town believe that I charge them with admiring the qualities which I here denounce; nor would I have them imagine that I find nothing in Calvin worthy of regard.

The attitude of Calvin towards Servetus is a fitting subject for meditation at this present time, because the imaginary crime of blasphemy was that which gave rise to the persecution of Servetus and his final martyrdom- I have called it an imaginary crime: I believe it to be as impossible and as absurd as the charge of witchcraft. To stigmatise as a blasphemer every man who opposes the established and popular religion of the day, is to make the chief merit of all great lives, blasphemy. If this is blasphemy, then Christ was chief amongst blasphemers. Martin Luther and John Wesley were opponents of established religions, and were hence in the strictest legal sense, blasphemers. It is well known to you that efforts are now being made to secure the repeal of the Blasphemy Laws. For many years past they have been regarded as quite obsolete, and have consequently been allowed to remain on the Statute Book without molestation. But it has suddenly been shewn that the penalties under the Blasphemy Laws are still applicable to English men and English women of this generation. They have this year been imposed upon three men found guilty of the charge. Now it is of no consequence to us to know the details of any other offences of which these three men may or may not have been guilty

Their charge is "blasphemy," their imprisonment is for "blasphemy." That, and nothing else. And if we take anything else into consideration we shall forget our duty.

Suppose that some man guilty of theft was tried in court upon an indictment charging him with teetotalism, and that he were sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment for being a teetotaller, how would the total abstainers rise up in indignation! There are people no doubt who would say, "Oh, never trouble about it. If he had not been imprisoned for this he would have been imprisoned for his theft; it is all the same." "But," you retort, "total abstinence is a virtue; his conviction as it now stands is an insult to us; so long as he is suffering for a virtuous thing he is a martyr and not a convict, and we object to have a thief posing as a martyr on our account." All this, and much more would be said by these indignant temperance people. And they would be right. Their best interests would be at stake.

But in addition to the strong feelings which would naturally be excited in the circumstance I have suggested, there is, in the real case, another stimulating feature: there is the hearty detestation which all liberal men feel, of the very name of the offence called blasphemy. It is a word which suggests inhumanity and cruelty of the most revolting nature. Its historical associations within the past three hundred years are almost enough to make any man ashamed of the human race. When I look back to the year 1619 and find a crowd of fiendish Hollanders beheading the grand-pensionary Barneveldt at the age of seventy-two, "for having," says his sentence, "used his uttermost endeavours to vex the Church of God," I do not marvel at the indignation which has been recently called forth. The indictment against Barneveldt is a literal rendering of the offence which has procured the imprisonment of the three Freethinkers.

I regard it therefore, as a spirit of Christian patriotism which is now urging men to do their utmost to obliterate from the statutes of our time these Blasphemy Laws. They are utterly incompatible with Christ's religion. I cannot imagine any man pleading for the retention of these laws, if he had learnt the lesson of doing unto others as he would have them do to him. The advocate of these ancient laws practically says to his fellowbeings—"Thou shalt believe

as I believe, even though thou canst not, or I will bind thee to do one of two things, —either to maintain eternal silence, or to speak always falsely and to act hypocrisy." It is manifest that such an attitude is diametrically opposed to the spirit of the lessons of Christ. But I regret to acknowledge that it is in complete accordance with the attitude hitherto taken by the majority of those who have called themselves Christians.

There never was a leader so belied by his followers as Christ. The late Emperor of China once said—"I notice that wherever Christians go, they whiten the soil with human bones; and I therefore will not have Christianity in my empire." What an impeachment of the Christians! and how miserably, disgracefully true it is! He gave us a gospel of peace and forgiveness. "*Wherever Christians go they whiten the soil with human bones.*" How faithless have the Christians been! He gave us a gospel of love. "*Wherever Christians go they whiten the soil with human bones.*" How cruelly have the Christians crucified their Lord! How have they slighted and spurned him who said—"If ye love me keep my commandments!" Christianity is a gospel of liberty, a gospel of toleration, a gospel of faith in the Truth—for the Truth's sake. And yet we enforce a law against what is called "blasphemy" in the year 1883, and thousands of professing Christians are exulting over the severity of the penalties. What an exposure of their faithlessness!

We have therefore to learn a lesson for the hour from the martyrdom of Servetus. Whilst we are reflecting upon the ignorance, the bigotry, and the unchristian intolerance of that sixteenth century which gave Servetus bitter scorn in return for love and faithful service, whilst we regard it as a spirit hostile to the mission of Christ, let us not for a mement lose sight of the fact that it is a spiritual disease prevalent to-day amongst many who claim to be his followers.

Servetus was a physician and a literary man; and he was eminent in both departments. He was author of many books upon religious, geographical, and physiological subjects. He edited a folio edition of Pagninus's Bible. He lived contemporaneously with Luther, Melancthon, and John Calvin. Being a man of original mind and honest intentions, he resolved to examine scrupulously all matters that fell in his way, and he naturally took up a position in both

science and religion which was opposed to the notions then current. It has been claimed on his account that he discovered the circulation of the blood. A great part of the credit of this discovery is beyond doubt due to him. It is now conceded that he was the first to expound the true way in which the blood passes from the right side of the heart through the lungs to the left side. But although this explanation was published by Servetus in 1553, Harvey has been credited with the whole discovery, who was not born until 1568. I suppose the exact truth is that both men were eminently deserving of gratitude for their devotion to physiological science, and for the light which they were able to throw upon this particular branch of it. I may add, however, in passing, that the circulation of the blood was never definitely proved even in Harvey's time. No one at that time was able to show how the blood passed from the final branching of the arteries into the final branching of the veins. The literal proof, which consisted in the exhibition of the capillary tubes, was reserved for Malpighi's microscope. The account of the discoveries of Servetus upon this subject, is contained in his book entitled "Christianismi Restitutio," or the restoration of Christianity. This book was so bitterly hated by the people, and was greeted with such craven fear by the learned, that Calvin seized upon it as a pretext for causing Servetus to be apprehended and cast into prison on a charge of heresy.

Calvin has denied this charge, but with all reliable historians his denial is considered as additional proof of his detestably low qualities. Seven years before Calvin had compassed his cruel end, he wrote a letter to Peter Viret, in which he said that if ever Servetus should come to Geneva, he would not allow him to return from it alive. It is also asserted on good authority, that there is in existence at the present day, in Paris, another letter written to Farel seven years before the martyrdom of Servetus, in which the following sentence occurs in the handwriting of John Calvin:—"Servetus has lately written to me and sent me at the same time a large book. . . He offers to come hither if I like it, but I will not engage my word; for if he comes and if any regard be had to my authority, I will not allow him to escape with his life."

Calvin at that time was a man of great influence in Geneva. His dictum in almost all religious matters was regarded as final, and he was so thoroughly accustomed to this deference, that when

Servetus denied the doctrine of the Trinity and exposed the false basis, upon which Calvin's harsh system was resting, all his former reverence for the learning of Servetus was put aside, and he became intent upon his speedy death. Do you wonder that Servetus rejected the doctrine of the Trinity? It was the most natural thing in the world. With a heart set free from superstition, and an independent judgment, no other result is possible. Of all theological impositions there has never been anything propounded so bewildering to reason as this. Heathendom never prostrated the intellects of its votaries before such palpable contradictions as are contained in the unchristian idea of a three-in-one Deity. It is a doctrine obscure in its origin, lame in its occasional efforts at reconciliation with nature, and unable to live in the light of free enquiry. You ask, "Why then has it existed so long?" and my reply is this:—"It has been maintained by brute force." If nature had not been tampered with, the doctrine of the Trinity would long since have passed into that obscurity which engulphs all that is worthless and false. But alongside this dogma there has been inculcated the idea that free enquiry in religious matters is sinful. Even those who have made a sacred principle of the right of private judgment have hitherto been timorous in their defence of it, and have contended only for half measures. But in the time of Servetus there were none who dared to maintain on his behalf the inherent right of the human mind to the exercise of all its faculties. In the eyes of Calvin there was no crime so great as the effort to oppose the popular religion of the day. Idleness and debauchery were regarded as virtues when they stood in comparison with heresy. In order to avoid threatening dangers, Servetus made his escape, and assuming another name, went to live at Vienna. Calvin traced his footsteps, and suborned men to expose him. He was apprehended and cast into prison, but having a good reputation in the town, he was treated with unusual kindness. Men who were not blinded by religious intolerance could discern in Servetus nothing but virtue, industry, and simplicity.

He lived with God in such untroubled love,
And clear confiding, as a child on whom
The Father's face has never yet but smiled;
And with men even, in such harmony
Of brotherhood, that whatsoever spark
Of pure and true in any human heart
Flickered and lived, it burned itself towards him
In an electric current through all bonds

Of intervening race and creed and time,
And flamed up to a heat of living faith
And love, and love's communion, and the joy
And inspiration of self-sacrifice.

Calvin, however, was not to be defeated in his intention; and Servetus, finding further traces of his diabolical design, it dawned suddenly upon his mind that Calvin was not merely his theological opponent but his mortal enemy; and, seizing upon a suitable opportunity, he escaped from his confinement, and determined to settle at Naples as a physician.

I cannot understand whether it was a panic of fear that seized him, or whether it was a desire to talk with Calvin in private and utter some remonstrance concerning his cruelty towards him; but certain it is, that notwithstanding the fact that Calvin was all-powerful there, he travelled by way of Geneva, and Calvin, who had heard of his escape from Vienna, and that he was coming towards Geneva on his way to Naples, was on the watch for him, and he had scarcely arrived in the city before he was apprehended and cast into prison. Thirty-eight separate indictments were preferred against him, and the name of all the indictments was heresy. The thirty-seventh is a fair example of the rest, in which it is said that Servetus in a printed work had defamed the doctrine preached by Calvin, and decried and caluminated it in every possible way, contrary to a decree passed on the 9th of November in the preceding year, which had pronounced that doctrine sacred and inviolable.

He admitted all that was truth in the indictments. He would utter no falsehood even to save his life.

When the trial had been going on for seven days, Calvin came into court and opposed Servetus in person; and then, two days afterwards, fearing that death might not be the penalty, the Procureur-General brought in no less than thirty new indictments which related chiefly to his personal history. Servetus, whilst refusing to abandon the truth, endeavoured to defend himself. Calvin drew up a written reply to this defence, which was put into the hand of Servetus as he stood before the judge on the 15th September. Calvin had taken a fortnight in its preparation; Servetus was called upon to refute it extemporaneously. But he took no further notice of it than to express briefly the extreme contempt

which he felt for its author, and to add—" In a cause so just, I am firm; I have not the least fear of death."

On the 26th October, Servetus was condemned to be burnt to death in a slow fire as a warning to all reformers, that they should not dare to oppose the popular notions of their time. A message was sent immediately to Calvin to tell him of the judge's decision, and sacrificing duty to pleasure, he put aside every work and appointment, and made great haste, in order that he might witness the execution.

In a letter written on the 8th September by Calvin, he says,—"The judges will be very cruel, very unjust to Christ and the doctrine which is according to Godliness, and they will be real enemies of the Church if they are not moved by the horrible blasphemies with which so vile a heretick assails the Divine Majesty." The sentence passed upon Servetus was this:—" We condemn thee, Michael Servetus, to be bound and carried to the Lieu de Champel, and there to be tied to a stake, and burnt alive with thy book, written with thine own hand, and printed, till thy body is reduced to ashes; and thus shall thou end thy days to serve as a warning to others who are disposed to act in the same manner. And we command you, our lieutenant, to cause our present sentence to be carried into effect."

On the morning of the day following, Servetus was visited in prison and urged to recant. They implored him to say that Christ was God. What a useless assertion it would have been, seeing that Servetus had proved his belief in the opposite! But it only proves to us the fact that when the spirit of persecution is abroad, being a bad thing in itself, it draws after it all the most diabolical vices of the lower nature. The love of truth is rudely trampled under foot; the command "Thou shalt not kill," is set at defiance; mercy and toleration are cast forth as if they had no right to a place in the human heart, and we find both men and women revelling and rejoicing in the cruel death of a fellow-being. Servetus was desired to deliver an address to the crowd before his execution, but he had other things to think about, and refused to do so. Calvin described this silence as "proof of his beastly stupidity;" those are his words. The pile consisted of wooden faggots, many of them still green and with leaves upon them. The poor victim was fastened to the trunk of a tree fixed in the earth, his feet reaching to the ground. A crown of straw sprinkled with brimstone was placed upon his head. His body was bound to the stake with an iron chain, and a coarse twisted

rope was loosely thrown round his neck. His book was next fastened to his thigh. He then begged the executioner to put him out of his misery as speedily as possible. The fire was lighted, and he cried out most piteously as the flames scorched his flesh,—for he had an extremely sensitive nervous organisation, and he felt the pain keenly. Some of the bystanders, at last, out of compassion, supplied the fire with fresh fuel, hoping to put an end to his misery. One writer tells us that a strong breeze sprang up and scattered the flames, and that Servetus was writhing in the fire between two or three hours.

Many attempts have been made to screen Calvin from odium. I for one am not interested in his impeachment. I care nothing for discussion concerning such individuals, but it is of vital importance to you and me that we should realise what a horrible and degrading thing is this spirit of persecution for blasphemy. It is reckoned a crime more vile than robbery or fraud. Men may kill their wives in quarrel and yet escape with lighter punishments than are awarded to those who try to be reformers in their own time. The persecutor says that blasphemy or heresy is an injury to God. God is infinite, and the punishment must be commensurate with the greatness of the Being injured. Now it is just absurd beyond all other things, that you should think such a thing possible. How *can* any man injure God? Or how can any human law-court defend God? Is it not sacrilege of a viler kind to set up a magistrate as the protector of Almighty? What more blasphemous thing could we be called upon to tolerate than that?

There is nothing more degrading in all the annals of the world than this same spirit of persecution which has recently sent three journalists to prison for an impossible offence. It behoves us, as we respect our own rights, to do all we can to protest against the verdict. It behoves us, as we love our country and take pride in its greatness, to use every effort for the repeal of all such enactments.

I have very little more to say to you to-night by way of application. You have glanced hastily with me at the influence of these laws against heresy in the case of Calvin and Servetus, and you know that the same laws still exist in this country and that they are not obsolete. In the year 1861, in the Court of Common Pleas, Lord Chief Justice Erle, in giving judgment said—"There are opinions which are in law a crime." Little attention was paid to this statement at the moment. Recent circumstances, however, have proved

two things: first, the truth of the words spoken; and second, the urgent need of an agitation in favour of the immediate and total repeal of all Heresy and Blasphemy Laws. It is a mistake to suppose that they can serve any good purpose. I am not called upon in this discourse to recapitulate the reasons which exist in favour of political or religious liberty. To many of you they are perfectly familiar. It is manifest that where discussion is forbidden, all progress is trammeled. If in those countries where idols of wood and stone are worshipped it is reckoned a criminal offence to oppose the popular religion, there will be few facilities for improvement; but if free discussion is permitted and encouraged, all their bad institutions will be exposed, and the good ones will be better understood and appreciated. Their useless idols will be dethroned, and there will be progress,—for no matter how long the struggle may be continued, truth will infallibly come out victorious. The attitude which ought to be taken up by Unitarians is that described by the poet Henry Taylor, in "Isaac Commenus."

> "Whatsoe'er possible evils lie before,
> Let us sincerely own them to ourselves
> With all unstinting unevasive hearts
> Reposing in the consciousness of strength,
> Or fervent hope to be endowed with strength
> Of all-enduring temper,—daring all truth."

Let me in conclusion urge upon you the importance of a single-minded action in this matter. I would, for our own sake, that it had been a Unitarian and not an Atheist who was imprisoned. I dare say we cannot defend our position without being misunderstood. But this is of no consequence. Our duty is plain. They who call themselves the Freethinkers are suffering falsely, and therefore unjustly. All other questions are merged into this, and until they are released and the Act is repealed, the nation lies under a cloud of ignominy painful to contemplate. My earnest wish is, that we may all be able to do something to help on the work.