

PROPHETS WITHOUT HONOUR?

MICHAEL SERVETUS

AND THE LIMITS OF TOLERANCE

Andrew Pettegree looks at how the life and death of a radical religious maverick points up the tensions between individualism and order in Reformation Europe.

Michael Servetus was one of the most original thinkers of the sixteenth century. His short, turbulent and occasionally brilliant career came to a tragic end when he was burned alive in Geneva on October 27th, 1553, by order of the city magistrates. His execution sent a shock-wave through Protestant Europe: indeed, it can be said to have been one of the formative events of the Reformation century. For Servetus was no simple-minded heretic or anabaptist, a marginal figure of the kind put to death by Protestant and Catholic states alike in the name of good order. Rather, he was a man of learning and culture: an original if wayward mind whose restless intelligence had ranged over a wide variety of fields. It was for his unorthodox religious views that Servetus went to the stake, but his achievements in the fields of geography, medicine, and as an editor of sacred and classical texts were scarcely less considerable. His death left many troubled and uneasy, and brought down upon Calvin, the Geneva reformer, a storm of controversy. More than any other event the destruction of Servetus may be said to have left an enduring stain on Calvin's historical reputation.

Yet for a man whose life and death were a matter of such controversy, Servetus remains a curiously shadowy figure. He founded no church and left no disciples; even basic facts about his life remain a matter of conjecture. The issues aroused by Servetus' execution soon came to obscure his ideas. Four hundred years later it is by no means easy to recapture the historical figure from the controversial debate. Servetus became, even in his own day, a potent symbol of religious intolerance: the theological ideas for which he died soon became submerged in these

DE TRINITATIS ERRORIBVS, LIBER PRIMVS.



*NSCRV-
tandis diuin-
ne Triadis,
sanctis arca-
nis, ab homi-
ne exordien-
dum eo du-
xi, quia ad
Verbi spe-
culationem,
sine funda-
mento CHRISTI, ascendentes, quam plurimos
cerno, qui parum aut nihil homini tribuunt, et ve-
rum CHRISTVM obliuioni penitus tradunt: quibus ego ad memoria, quis sit ille CHRISTVS,
reducere curabo. Caeterum, quid, quantumq; sit
CHRISTO tribuendum, iudicabit ecclesia.*

*Pronomine demonstrante hominem, quem hu-
manitatem appellant, concedam haec tria. Primo
hic est IESVS CHRISTVS. Secundò, hic est
filius Dei. Tertio, hic est Deus.*

The sin against the Holy Ghost?
The initial letter from Servetus' 1531
De Trinitatis Erroribus.

wider issues. The search for the historical Servetus reveals a troublesome, unruly and disputatious figure; a somewhat unlikely apostle of ecumenism.

Michael Servetus was born around 1510 in Villeneuve de Sijena near Saragossa in northern Spain. Little is known of his Spanish upbringing, although, as we shall see, it seems to have left an enduring mark on his thinking. Certainly Servetus came of a well-to-do local family, and was able to make full use of the educational opportunities opening up in this period for a young man of means. After early studies at the university of Saragossa the young man entered the service of the Franciscan friar Juan Quintana, with whom he travelled abroad, first to France and Toulouse,

where Servetus enrolled at the university to study law. Quintana's appointment as confessor to Charles V enabled Servetus to be present in Bologna when the emperor was crowned there in 1530. The event made a deep impression on the young student. The sight of the pope, Clement VII, borne through the streets in majesty filled him with revulsion, and Servetus soon after repudiated the old Church. Abandoning his legal studies he set off for the centres of German Protestantism in search of a new philosophy.

He settled first in Basle, where the growing unorthodoxy of his views soon wore down the patience of Oecolampadius, the local reformer. By 1531 Servetus had moved on, to Strasburg, and it was there that he published his first and most important theological work, the *De Trinitatis Erroribus* (On the Errors of the Trinity). For a young man of twenty this was an extraordinarily daring, not to say foolhardy, undertaking, for the doctrine of the Trinity was one of the cornerstones of the Christian faith for Catholic and Protestant alike. The book was in many ways an impressive achievement. In support of his contention that the tripartite nature of God was unscriptural, Servetus adduced citations from no fewer than forty church fathers, as well as a wide range of non-patristic sources. But against this, the composition showed signs of haste and a lack of care which detracted from its merits, and revealed it for what it was: the product of a precocious, fervent youth who had only recently left the Roman Church. In a final act of naive folly Servetus appended his name to the title-page (the printer, Johann Setzer of Hagenau, was more circumspect).

The publication of Servetus' work predictably provoked a storm of critic-



Honour at the stake; a contemporary engraving of Michael Servetus, indicating his ultimate fate.

ism. In order to pacify the Strasburg authorities the author was forced to promise to publish a recantation, but the form this took said much about Servetus. This second work (*Dialogues on the Trinity*, published 1532) was more moderate in tone, but the promised recantation was derisory. In his preface the author noted the imperfections of his first work, but he recanted only in so far as his arguments were ill thought-out and incomplete: of the controversial trinitarian doctrines he withdrew nothing.

With the publication of the *Dialogues*, Servetus had little option but to leave Strasburg. For a time he dropped out of sight; it was rumoured that he had died or been imprisoned. In fact he

was living in Lyons under an assumed name, working for a firm of scholars-printers, the Trechsels, and pursuing his own expanding scholarly interests. In 1535 he saw through the Trechsel press a new edition of Ptolemy's *Geography*, a lavishly illustrated folio. The following year he was in Paris, studying medicine, and it was here in 1537 that he published his first medical book, a discussion of the medicinal value of syrups based on Galen. The *Discourse on Syrups*, was something of a best seller, going through five editions in under ten years. Servetus obviously had some talent in this line: it has been suggested that he played an important part in the discovery of the pulmonary circulation of the blood (mentioned

briefly in his last book); if so, his observations anticipated the more complete work of Harvey by over a century.

But even in Lyons Servetus could not long avoid controversy. In 1538 he was arrested and charged with heresy, on this occasion for having given unauthorised lectures on judicial astronomy (an offence which he had characteristically compounded by rushing into print with a justification). On this occasion he made a sufficiently plausible defence to secure his acquittal (presumably his accusers had not penetrated his alias), but his lectures were forbidden and it seemed wise to withdraw from Paris. He settled at Vienne near Lyon, where for the next twelve years he made a comfortable living practising medicine and helping the local printers. But Servetus had not abandoned his interest in theology and in 1545 he initiated a correspondence with John Calvin in Geneva. The initially polite exchange soon degenerated into mutual hostility. Dissatisfied with Calvin's answers to a series of his theological questions, Servetus quickly abandoned the pose of eager pupil. The copy of the *Institutes* with which Calvin had presented him was returned scribbled with critical comments, along with a partial draft of a new defence of his views on the Trinity which Servetus was preparing for the press. Calvin's response was ominous. 'Servetus lately wrote to me', he reported to a colleague, 'and coupled with his letter a long volume of his delirious fancies ... He takes it upon himself to come hither, if it be agreeable to me. But I am unwilling to pledge my word for his safety, for if he shall come, I will never permit him to depart alive.'

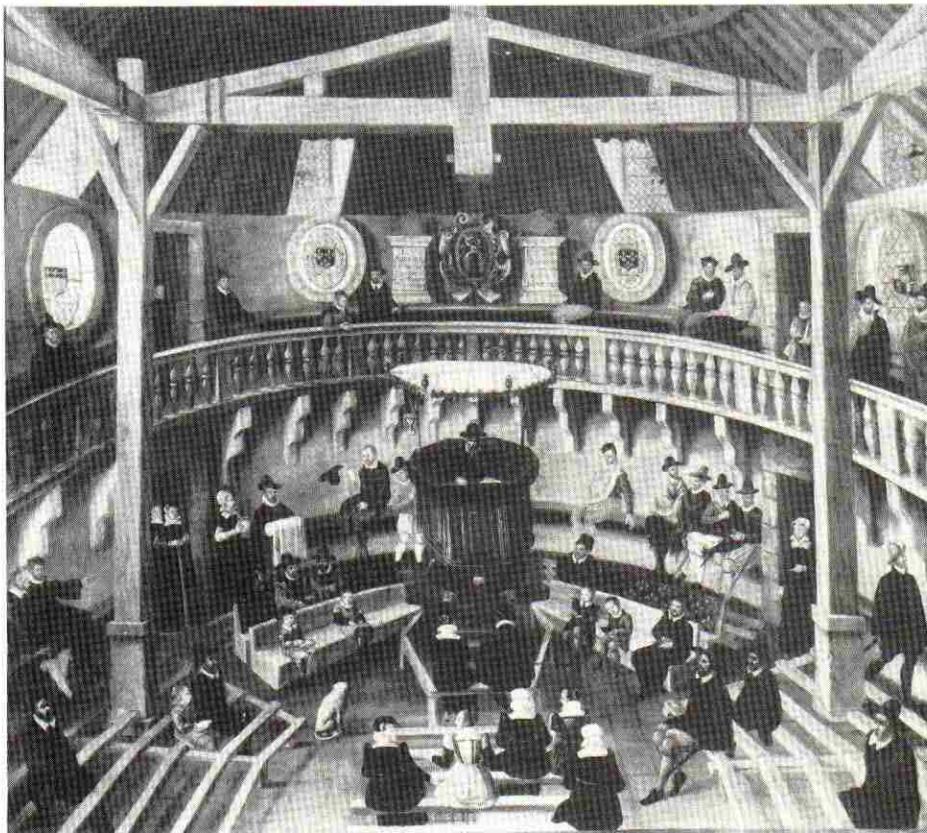
Thus warned Servetus might have withdrawn, but it was not in his nature to allow an opponent the last word. In 1553 the manuscript Calvin had rejected was published, now greatly augmented and expanded. In addition to a restatement of the controversial trinitarian doctrines, the *Christianismi Restitutio* (Restitution of Christianity) explored millenarianism and endorsed believers' baptism. It was a complete statement of Servetus' mature theological views but a highly provocative one, and for good measure Servetus chose to append his letters to Calvin as an appendix. The *Restitutio* was printed secretly and anonymously at Vienne, but Servetus' authorship did not remain long concealed. A copy had been despatched to Calvin, and it was probably at his prompting that Serve-

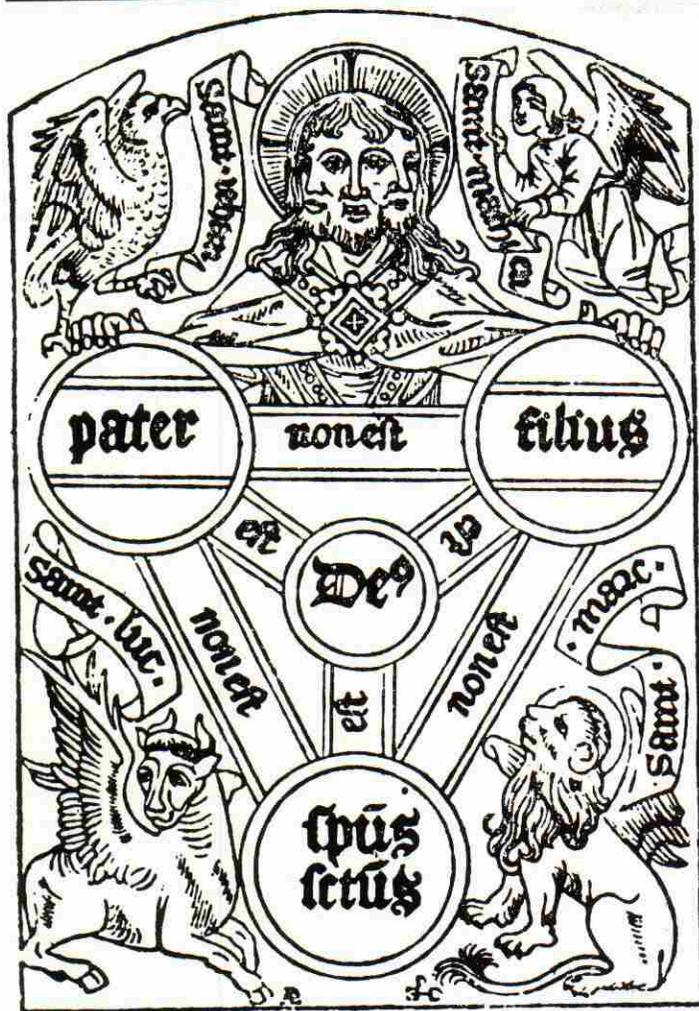


Cleansing the temple; an engraving of the 1530 coronation of Charles V by Pope Clement VII – whose reception in pomp so disgusted Servetus, and (below) a scene of the Huguenot church at Lyon – at example of the more pared-down, and desacrilised worship of which Servetus was a keen exponent.

tus' identity was made known to the local authorities. Arrested and charged with heresy, Servetus escaped again: this time by scaling the wall of the prison garden. He now planned to make for Italy, but for reasons unknown, and with that disregard for prudence which characterised his whole career, he stopped off in Geneva. Since it was a Sunday, he even went to hear Calvin preach; swiftly recognised, he was arrested and flung into prison.

Even now the outcome was by no means certain. Calvin had enemies in Geneva who might have been expected to use Servetus to embarrass the reformer. Summoned before the council Servetus continued to breathe defiance, and the syndics, with whom responsibility for the case lay, seemed reluctant to proceed. To break the deadlock the magistrates resolved to consult the other leading Swiss churches. The ministers were instructed to draw up a schedule of Servetus' alleged errors, which were then circulated, along with his replies. The judgements of the Swiss churches were received on





Undivided attention? This pre-Reformation woodcut includes the symbols of the four evangelists and portrays in diagrammatic form the theology of the Trinity – three persons in one God, though stressing that ‘the father is not the son’, etc. Though the formula may have been neatly comprehended by most clerics, in popular devotion it was easy for it to become distorted and the subject of superstition – and as Servetus was keen to point out, the strict Biblical authority for it was shaky.

mature Servetus ‘was no less antithetical to Unitarianism than to the views of Luther, Calvin and Rome’. Servetus’ controversial views on the nature of the Godhead seem to have arisen from his own idiosyncratic view of history. Servetus envisaged the historical process as a cosmic battle going through several ages, in which God and Satan struggled for control over man and the world. During this time God had appeared in different guises at different times: rather than speaking of separate persons within the Godhead, Servetus preferred to identify them as various expressions of the same divinity.

What had moved Servetus to devise such a system? The key to understanding this may well lie, as Friedman suggests, in his Spanish background. Spain in the century after the reconquest was the heir to a vastly more varied cultural heritage than most other parts of Christian Europe. The forced converts from Judaism and Islam who chose to remain in the peninsular were widely suspected of continuing to practise their own faith in secret. The young Servetus would thus have been ex-

A title-page of Servetus’ 1542 edition of the Pagnini Bible. Though a rote job, in compiling the glosses to it, Servetus sided with Hebrew scholars in understanding a ‘young woman’ rather than ‘virgin’ meaning to the famous Isaiah Christmas prophecy; his demythologising gloss of the so-called ‘Man of Sorrows’ chapter, indicates further his flight from orthodoxy.

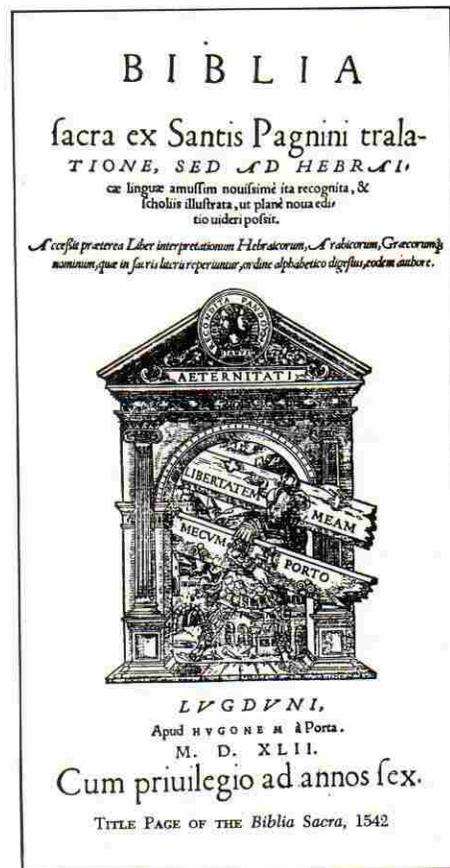
October 21st, and it was these which effectively sealed Servetus’ fate. All condemned Servetus’ views in the strongest terms and urged firm action: Zurich, in particular, exhorted the senate to severity. On October 27th Servetus was summoned to hear the council’s verdict, and immediately led out to execution. Even Calvin’s final plea that a more merciful mode of death be allowed was denied.

And so Servetus was done to death; but the controversies he had aroused did not die with him. Rather, his case rapidly became a *cause célèbre*. At Bullinger’s urging Calvin quickly composed a defence of his actions, but this was not enough to stifle growing doubts in the international community. These objections were focused with new clarity by the appearance the following year of Sebastian Castellio’s *De Haereticis*, a collection of texts deploring coercion of consciences and explicitly condemning Servetus’ execution. Castellio’s great work framed the terms of a debate which has continued down to the present, without ever losing its original partisan venom: even modern historians have not scrupled to con-

demn Calvin as a murderer and a bigot.

All of this has inevitably tended to impede dispassionate treatment of the theological issues at the centre of the controversy. Servetus’ trial in Geneva left no doubt that it was his anti-trinitarian teachings which were regarded as central. The articles of accusation drawn up by the Genevan ministers were based mainly on his first work, *The Errors of the Trinity*. Other controversial teachings, such as believers’ baptism, were mentioned only in passing. And it is this aspect of the Spaniard’s thought which has been the focus of attention too of modern writers, particularly those who have adopted Servetus as the forbear of other anti-trinitarian writers of the period and the father of the Unitarian movement.

It should be clear however that Servetus’ writings defy such easy classification. Servetus built a complicated system of belief which was equally critical of every sort of orthodoxy. A study of his last work, *The Restitution of Christianity*, leads the most careful modern student of his writings, Jerome Friedman, to the conclusion that the





War of words – Calvin's defence of the Trinity against Servetus' was robust (opposite – the title page of the French edition).

DECLARATION
POUR MAINTENIR LA
*vraye foy que tiennent tous Chrestiens
de la Trinite des personnes en un seul Dieu.*

PAR JEAN CALVIN.

Contre les erreurs detestables de Michel Servet Espagnol. Ou il est aussi monstré, qu'il est licite de punir les heretiques: & qu'il y a bon droit de le mefchant a esté executé par justice en la ville de Geneve.



CHEZ JEAN CRESPIN

A GENEVE,
M. D. LIIII.



posed to important non-Christian traditions of thought. Islamic, and particularly Jewish writers certainly influenced him profoundly: his first work cited an exceptionally wide range of rabbinic sources. It was well-known that the doctrine of the Trinity was a major obstacle to Jewish acceptance of Christianity, and similarly to Muslims; hence its concern to Servetus. The question he posed his Christian contemporaries: 'what sort of reasoning should you rely on in order that such Jews may be persuaded?', reveals the influence on his own thinking, as does the bold statement of scepticism in classic trinitarian doctrine: 'The Jews are supported by so many authorities that they naturally wonder at the great division of God.'

Seen in this light Servetus becomes a more attractive figure, probing at the doctrines which divided the great faiths of his age. However, it must be recognised that this aspect of his thought had little appeal to contemporaries. Even those who spoke out against his execution did not attempt to defend his views. Rather, it was his condemnation which shocked them: Castellio and his colleagues took their stand on the right of freedom of expression in matters where the divine mysteries admitted of no comfortable certainties. It was thus as a symbol of Protestant intolerance that Servetus became most widely known, largely through the agency of Castellio's book. The influence of the *De Haereticis* was felt throughout the Protestant communities of Europe, in France, Germany and England, indeed everywhere where men felt constrained by the growing demand to conform to externally imposed doctrinal orthodoxy. In the Netherlands, in particular, arguments for toleration taken from Castellio offered an effective counterpoint to the increasing authoritarianism of orthodox Calvinism.

It must be said, however, that Servetus remains a rather unlikely hero of religious toleration, even more so as the prophet of modern ecumenism. For his was not an ecumenical spirit. His writings show little respect for the sensibilities of those he sought to convert. His tendency to rush into print on every occasion, his disputatiousness and predilection for violently abusive language, all tended to damage his cause. Even in Geneva it was his arrogant refusal to admit the possibility of

Calvin and other Protestant leaders feared a total breakdown of authority such as that in the mad millenarian Anabaptist regime set up in Munster by Jan of Leiden (left) in the 1530s.

error which, as much as anything, sealed his fate. His replies to the ministers' articles were peppered with the sort of empty abuse which would have done his case little good with the Swiss churches who acted as umpires. 'You worthless and shameless twister!' (this of Calvin). 'The objection is so stupid that if Calvin had a grain of intelligence he would be ashamed to repeat it so often.' Even a sympathetic modern scholar like Earl Wilbur, the editor of the early tracts, concedes that the *Errors of the Trinity* probably did more harm than good. Up until this time the doctrine had not figured largely in the reformers' writings, but now the need to defend their orthodoxy against Catholic criticism took precedence. Melancthon, Calvin, and all the Protestant confessions are unequivocal in treating the doctrine as necessary to salvation. The French Confession of Faith of 1559 went so far as to repudiate Servetus by name.

Servetus, then, hardly stands as a representative of religious toleration. Rather, he epitomises, albeit in extreme form, that group of sixteenth-century figures who took their inspiration from the Reformation but refused to be trammelled by it. If we look beneath the surface of the sixteenth-century Protestant movement a surprising number of such men emerge: Castellio and his friends in Basle and Lyon; the German spiritualist Sebastian Franck; Acontius and Haemstede in England during the early 1560s; Jean Moreli in France; Plantin, Van Meteren and the Family of Love. Men like Franck explicitly rejected the rigid orthodoxy of the magisterial reformers as a new tyranny, and demanded instead freedom of expression and freedom to speculate.

That Servetus should die in Calvin's Geneva was in a way appropriate, because in Calvin men of this stamp found their most determined adversary. But in truth all the magisterial reformers recognised the need to impose restraints on doctrinal debate. In the condemnation of Servetus the Church at Geneva received the support not only of its Swiss colleagues but also of the mild and humane Philip Melancthon. 'I have read your writing in which you have clearly refuted the horrible blasphemies of Servetus', he told Calvin in 1555. 'I maintain that your magistrates acted with justice in having put to death a blasphemer, after having regularly judged the affair.' This was a matter on which the otherwise divided reformers could agree, for they shared a common problem, one that went right to the heart of Luther's reformation. Having thrown off the



Out of tune – a satirical woodcut attacking the 1548 Interim of Augsburg. The failure of this attempt by the Emperor Charles V to bridge the gap between Protestant and Catholic underlines how unfavourable a climate for toleration Servetus operated in.

power of the pope, where now did the authority to establish true doctrine lie? What was the irreducible core of belief on which no debate could be tolerated? All the reformers were acutely sensitive to the charge that in rejecting Rome they had introduced anarchy, and encouraged the excesses of Anabaptism. The defence of their Church thus demanded restraints, and, specifically, that the mystery of the Trinity should be defended as one of the essentials of Christian belief. The case was neatly put by the ministers of Zurich, in their response to the Servetus case. 'We think in this case you ought to manifest much faith and zeal', they wrote to Calvin, 'inasmuch as our churches have abroad the bad reputation of being heretical, and of being particularly favourable to heresy. Holy Providence at this time affords you an opportunity of freeing yourself and us from that injurious suspicion, if you know how to be vigilant and active in preventing the further spread of that poison, and we have no doubt but that your seigneurs will do so.'

In other words Servetus must die to defend the fundamentals of faith and the integrity of the Church. We can see then that the trial and execution of Servetus did broach fundamental issues. For Servetus the case was less clear: he died as the apostle of a cause he had never explicitly espoused, that of religious toleration. But in putting to death a man whose views posed no direct threat to public order, the Church and State of Geneva asserted an

important principle, the right of the Protestant churches to determine the limits of dissent. Thus was laid one of the cornerstones of the confessional development of the second generation of the Reformation, the generation which saw the emergence of Calvinism as the dominant Protestant force.

To twentieth-century minds, these issues appear in a different light. 350 years after Servetus' trial and execution, in a symbolic act of atonement, the citizens of Geneva permitted the erection of an expiatory monument as near as possible to the spot where Servetus died. His execution has come to seem an act of intolerable barbarism. Yet in an age which placed such value on unity and order, Servetus was an almost uniquely troubling figure: the prophet of a 'restitution of Christianity' beyond the comprehension even of those who defended so passionately his right to speculate on the essentials of faith.

FOR FURTHER READING:

R.H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic. The life and work of Michael Servetus* (Beacon Press, 1953, reprinted 1978); J. Friedman, *Michael Servetus: A Case Study in Total Heresy* (Droz, 1978); and the shorter piece by Friedman in *Profiles of Radical Reformers*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Goertz (Herald Press, 1982); an exhaustive bibliography, edited by Gordon Kinder, in the series *Bibliotheca Dissidentium* (vol. x., Koerner, 1989).

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