

THE CASE OF MICHEL SERVETUS<sup>1</sup>

## The background and the unfolding of the case

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*Introduction*

The case of Michel Servetus, who was burned in Geneva on the twenty-seventh of October 1553, has often been pointed to as the epitome of religious fanaticism and intolerance, and as a symbol of John Calvin's merciless attitude toward his opponents. For more than three centuries, books have been written on this subject, often putting aside essential documents, or interpreting them in a fallacious way, in order to convey this image of the French Reformer. At the turn of the century, in a time of violent verbal confrontation between Christians and anti-clericals in France, the polemic raged and gave rise to many passions. But it was also this same period which made available to the public many documents, mostly via the publication of the *Opera Calvini*. Earlier, the Swiss Herminjard had published as well the correspondence of the Reformers, another invaluable source of information about the Reformation era.

A little later, Emile Doumergue, a Frenchman who was honorary dean of the Faculty of Theology in Montauban, began publishing his monumental biography of Calvin, *Jean Calvin, les hommes et les choses de son temps*, seven volumes of about six hundred pages each. Nearly every other biography on Calvin has had to draw from Doumergue's work, because it is so thorough and detailed. Although it must be acknowledged that Doumergue is consistently favorable toward Calvin's personality, he is equally consistent in quoting authors hostile toward Calvin, in order to allow his readers to form their own opinions.

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This essay is essentially based on Doumergue's presentation, as well as on volume VIII of the *Opera Calvini*, where among other documents, the minutes of the case of Michel Servetus in Geneva are to be found.

*Presentation of Calvin's position in Geneva in 1553*

Before presenting the facts of Michel Servetus' life, thought and career, it is important to sketch the situation of Calvin in Geneva at the time of Servetus' arrival in that city, since the political background is essential to a proper understanding of the whole case.

During the election of the thirteenth of November 1552, the Party of the Libertines, which was extremely hostile toward Calvin and his system of church discipline, came to power in Geneva. Men such as Ami Perrin (leader of the Libertines), Favre and Vandiel were elected councilors at the *Petit Conseil* (which consisted of twenty-five members). Calvin had never worked for a more antagonistic government.<sup>2</sup> (Remember also that Calvin himself was not a *bourgeois* of the city of Geneva and that he consequently did not have the right to vote in a general political election, or even to have an official authoritative say in any decision made by the *Petit Conseil*. The privilege of *bourgeoisie* was granted to him only five years before his death.) At the same time, the neighboring city of Bern, acting as guardian of Geneva as a result of a treaty signed a few decades earlier, was supporting the party of the Libertines. Civil and religious authorities of Bern had, in any case, never been too favorable toward Calvin.

Eight months after this Genevan election, in July 1553, Calvin said to the *Petit Conseil* that he was thinking of resigning because of the unbearable pressure put upon him.<sup>3</sup> In France, during the same period, persecution against Protestants was raging and many of them were sentenced to the stake (among them, five in Lyon, on whose behalf Calvin in Geneva and other Swiss cities interceded in vain).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. O.C. XXI, 145-148. Th. Beza, author of a biography of Calvin, describes the events that took place during that year, with specific mention of this election and the difficulties which followed for the church and the Reformation at large.

<sup>3</sup>"M. Calvin a remonstré et prié qu'on ne fusse desplaisant si, puysqu'il veoit que, pour ce qu'on luy veult quelque mal, plusieurs murmurent et se destornent de suyvre la parolle, il se retiroit à part sans plus servir; toutesfois a prié qu'on veuille aouyr la parolle de Dieu, et les laisser servir au nom de Dieu" (Registers of the Council, 24 July 1553).

<sup>4</sup>A letter of Beza to Bullinger, dated 15 May 1552, gives the detail of their arrest, cf. O.C. XIV, 317. Many letters written by Calvin on this matter can be found in O.C. XIX (cf. 347-348; 468-469, 476).

It is in this very threatening context of Calvin's activity in Geneva, threatening as well as for the Reformation in general, that the Servetus affair broke out, with a letter from a French refugee to Geneva, *Guillaume de Trie*, a friend of Calvin to his cousin Arneys, a Roman Catholic residing in Lyon, February 26, 1553, which dealt with a man called Michel Servetus. But who was Michel Servetus?

### *The life of Michel Servetus*

Very little is known about Servetus' life before his arrival in the Swiss city of Basel in 1531.<sup>5</sup> He was probably born in 1511, in Villanova, in the Spanish province of Aragon where his father was a notary. Servetus seems to have left Spain at the age of fourteen or fifteen and studied law between 1526 and 1528 in Toulouse. It is probably there that he read the Bible for the first time, along with other fellow students.<sup>6</sup>

Servetus then entered into correspondence with the Swiss Reformer of Basel, Oecolampadius, and at the age of twenty he published his first book, "De Trinitate Erroribus," *On the errors of the Trinity*.<sup>7</sup> In that book he proclaimed that the Bible, in this case, the Vulgate, was a book from above and that faith was a movement of the heart. He also declared that the sum of philosophy and science was to be found in the Bible and that the words of Christ penetrated to his innermost being.<sup>8</sup> He insisted on the simplicity of the Bible, which he said was addressed to simple people. He hated the philosophy of Aristotle, and held that philosophy was of no use for teaching.<sup>9</sup>

But in the same book, he also declared that the doctrine of the Trinity made atheists of people and deprived them of God because the idea of a tripartite God had been inherited from Greek philosophy. The church, he said, had deviated from its course and had leaned toward

<sup>5</sup>One has to rely mainly on two autobiographical statements made by Servetus himself later in his life to get information about him. The problem is that these two statements, although both of them made upon an oath, are almost always contradictory.

<sup>6</sup>"Là, il print cognoissance, avec quelques escolliers, de lire à la sainte escripture et évangile. ce qu'il n'avoit jamais fait paravant" (O.C. VIII, 767).

<sup>7</sup>De Trinitatis erroribus libri septem per Michaellem Serveto, alias Reves ab Aragonia hispanum, anno MDXXXI.

<sup>8</sup>usque ad viscera, *De Trinitate*, fol. 107<sup>b</sup>.

<sup>9</sup>Here is one of Servetus' statements illustrating his feelings toward Greek philosophy: "This philosophical plague has been brought to us by the Greeks. For, more than any other man, they are addicted to philosophy and we, hanging on their lips, have also been made philosophers" (*De Trinitate*, 43<sup>b</sup>).

polytheism. Christ is worthy of being worshiped, said Servetus, and he granted him everything except eternal existence. According to him, the words "Son" or "Holy Spirit" should not designate persons. In his correspondence with Oecolampadius, Servetus repeated that the Son of God did not have to become a man, but that a man had to become the son of God. In the same letters, Servetus, as a young man of twenty, spoke to Oecolampadius, who was about fifty years of age, with a kind of arrogance and conceitedness, reprimanding the old man. These letters were printed in Basel in 1536 by the same editor who had published Calvin's first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that same year, so it is quite probable that Calvin would have read those letters.

Whatever the case may be, Servetus' "De Trinitate Erroribus" was a book full of erudition and ingenuity, a mixture of gnosticism, pantheism and gospel. However, all of Christian theology from the Gospels on was attacked in this book, and as soon as it was published, the Roman Church tried to ensure that it would be suppressed. The situation was even more serious for Protestants, since Servetus was considered by many to be a Protestant, which would lead to much slander directed against the teaching of the Reformers.<sup>10</sup> Oecolampadius had already denounced Servetus' doctrine as being fallacious and actually the book provoked scandal everywhere. Martin Bucer refuted it in his lessons. Servetus tried to find refuge in Strasbourg but the reaction of Bucer was somewhat mitigated, although he said later from the pulpit, "Servetus deserves to be torn into pieces, after having had his entrails ripped out." Zwingli, already in 1530, had warned his friends against Servetus, saying, "The false and perverse doctrine of the perverse and detestable Spaniard would upset all our Christian religion. If Christ were not truly Eternal God, He could not be our Saviour."<sup>11</sup> Luther and Melancton also reacted against Servetus, Luther in his treatise against the Antinomians of 1539.

In order to avoid a conviction and a prison sentence in Basel, where he was staying, Servetus published a new treatise, slightly smaller, with

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<sup>10</sup>Soon enough, a certain Claude de Saintes was to write (*Déclaration d'aucuns athéismes de la doctrine de Calvin et de Bèze*): "However, we claim that Calvin, Beza and their accomplices are, through their doctrine, doctors of Servetus and of the Trinitarians, and bring again the ancient Arianism, to the great danger of all kings and Christian nations, and for the advancement of the Turc" (cited in Doumergue, vi, 201).

<sup>11</sup>Heinrich Bullinger, *Antwort der Dieneren der kyrchen zu Zurich uff D. Jacoben Anderesen, zugenampt Schmidly, widerlegen*, cited by Mosheim, *Antwortiger*, 17, n. 1.

a preface addressed to the reader in which he retracted his earlier assertions:

What I have recently written against the accepted doctrine of the Trinity, now, O innocent reader, I retract it all, not because it was false, but only because it was imperfect, and written as by a child for children.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, it was a very formal and somewhat cunning retraction.

After this, Servetus left Basel and disappeared. He took a new name, Michel de Villeneuve, and for about twenty years (1532-1553) played the role of a learned, orthodox, faithful Roman Catholic. For twenty years, nobody suspected that Michel de Villeneuve was the author of the book of 1531.

Servetus made a living in Lyon as a proofreader in a printing house which published the medical books of a famous physician, Champier. Champier initiated him into medicine, and Servetus soon became the medical practitioner of the archbishop of the city of Vienne, south of Lyon.

An interesting fact deserves to be mentioned here: during a medical controversy, a remarkable Protestant botanist called Fuchs (he gave his name to a flower, the fuchsia) had opposed Champier, mixing religion with botany and speaking of justification by faith. His book was burned in Paris by the hand of the executioner in 1536. Servetus then wrote a "brevissima apologia" for Champier,<sup>13</sup> in which he attacked Fuchs as a heretic, denounced the doctrine of justification by faith and became the staunch defender of Roman Catholic orthodoxy.

From Lyon, Servetus went to Paris, where he taught mathematics at the *Collège des Lombards*. Calvin and Servetus knew each other by reputation and arranged a secret meeting. Calvin, still in France at that time but avoiding Paris for security reasons, risked coming to the rendezvous at *rue Saint Antoine*. But Servetus did not come.<sup>14</sup>

In Paris, Servetus studied geography, and published a remarkable edition of Ptolemaeus' geography in 1535. In his preface Servetus described the temperament of Spaniards:

<sup>12</sup>Dialogorum de Trinitate libri duo. De justitia regni christi capitula quatuor, Per Michaelem Serveto, alias Reves ab Aragonia hispanum, anno MDXXXII.

<sup>13</sup>Brevissima Apologia Symphoriani Campegii in Leonhardum Fuchsium.

<sup>14</sup>O.C. XXI. 57.

The spirit of Spaniards is an anxious one, dreaming of great things. By way of pretense and a certain verbosity, they display a wider knowledge than what they really have; they like sophistry more than they should. As far as religious rites are concerned, Spaniards are considered to be the most superstitious people of all mortals.

This description later proved to be a surprisingly accurate description of Servetus himself, almost a self-portrait.

At this time, however, Servetus' main interest was medicine and he may have discovered the principle of blood circulation. In any case, he was the first to speak of it in a printed book, *Christianismi Restitutio*, published in 1553,<sup>15</sup> but many scholars consider that it was the Italian physician Renato Colombo, from the University of Padova, who truly discovered this principle, even though he did not mention it in a book until 1559.<sup>16</sup> Colombo had been working on this topic for many years before the publication of his book.

Servetus published a treatise about syrups *Syruporum universa ratio* which was a great success. During this period, he strongly believed in astrology and violently attacked physicians who opposed it, which resulted in a court case in 1538 between him and the University of Paris. The litigants requested the death penalty for him, but in the end he escaped with a retraction and an admonition — just as in Basel.

In Vienne, Servetus was employed in the service of the archbishop Pierre Palmier, who was very much preoccupied by the progress of the Protestant "heresy," in Geneva as well as in other places. In order to please his master, Servetus concealed his ideas, as the dedication to Palmier in his second edition of Ptolemaeus' geography shows. He attended mass, though he detested it. In his book *Christianismi*

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<sup>15</sup>The description of blood circulation in Servetus' *Restitutio* comes surprisingly under the form of a physiological digression after a quotation of the following Biblical text: "The soul is in the blood; the soul itself is blood." In the *Journal des savants* of April 1854, M. Flourens explains: "When one looks at Servetus' theological writings, one quickly realizes how he decided to get only interested in the literal sense. Scripture says that the soul is in the blood, and that the soul is the blood. Thus, Servetus says, in order to know how the soul is formed, one must know how the blood is formed; in order to know how the blood is formed, one must know how it moves (. . .)."

<sup>16</sup>*De Re Anatomica*. Unlike Servetus, who did not claim to have discovered the principle of blood circulation, Colombo said that he was the first to have observed it. He taught his discovery before publishing it, and it is not impossible that Servetus would have heard of it through Italian students of Colombo.

*Restitutio*, he declared: "We are forced today to observe the rites of idolatry." And later, confronted with this specific point during his Genevan trial, he confessed that he had gone to the mass fearing for his life. What contrast here with the Protestant martyrs!

In this book, obviously written as an answer to Calvin's *Institutio*, Servetus' style was confused, unclear, overly subtle and full of contradictions even according to his most favorable critics. His Latin was improper and his expression so intricate that even today no one who has read it dares to say that he has fully understood him.<sup>17</sup>

### *Servetus' theology*

The theology of Servetus could be called *Pantheistic Sabellianism*. According to Sabellius, creation is eternal and incarnation is permanent. Every being is an incarnation of God. Christ is a superior incarnation, but eventually his divinity is denied. Servetus was violently anti-trinitarian. He called the triune God "Deus tripartitus, Cerberus with three heads, hell's dog with three heads, devilish phantom, a poetic monster, an illusion of Satan."<sup>18</sup> He also attacked the Gnostics and Neo-Platonists,<sup>19</sup> but finally came close to their positions, from which he developed a system. In contrast, the Reformers were practical believers, first of all preoccupied with sin and redemption, rather than with abstraction and dialectics (we could also refer to the controversy between Arius and Athanasius in the same terms). In Servetus' *Restitutio* one can read,

God does not create anything in which he does not show and communicate himself. God is everywhere, full of the essence of all things. In him he contains the essence of all things in such a way that, without anything else created, he can show himself to us as air, as stone, as rod, as flower, as anything. God in wood is wood, in stone he is stone, having in him the form of a stone, the true substance of a stone, although the matter of

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<sup>17</sup>Cf. Emerton, 144-145. The *Restitutio* comprises five books and two dialogues on the Trinity; three books on faith, justice, the kingdom of Christ; four books on the new birth from above and the kingdom of the antichrist; thirty letters to Calvin; and in addition the sixty signs of the reign of the antichrist; finally an apology against Melancthon, related to the mystery of the Trinity.

<sup>18</sup>*Restitutio*. 119.

<sup>19</sup>*De Trinitate*. 42<sup>b</sup>-43<sup>a</sup>.

stone is missing. Does God change when he shows himself to us in a hidden form?<sup>20</sup>

*Servetus' Christology*

According to Servetus, Christ is God — not by nature, but by grace, by privilege: the Father sanctified, anointed and exalted Christ, because Christ humiliated himself.<sup>21</sup> He concludes that all the children of men who are also children of God must aspire to this moral divinity of Christ, to becoming like Christ and imitating him.

The debate, which had already taken place between Arius and Athanasius, was as follows: If Jesus Christ is not of the same essence as God, someone else can come who will reveal God better than Jesus Christ did; thus, the Christian religion is not the ultimate, absolute religion.

Servetus was torn between two opposing desires: on the one hand he attributed to Christ as much divinity as possible and on the other hand he negated the Trinity as much as possible. In the end, he asserted that God evolves: a first evolution leads to the world and a second evolution leads to Christ. Christ is begotten and little by little he is presented as the idea that was in God. The Logos acquires more and more importance, while God the Most High, or the Father, withdraws more and more into an obscure background, becomes more and more indeterminate, a kind of gnostic abyss.<sup>22</sup>

Actually, according to Servetus, Christ is neither God nor man. His body is not a human body. The flesh of Christ is divine, from the substance of deity. Here is how Servetus conceives of such a physical phenomenon: any begetting is produced by the mixing of three superior elements, which are water, air and fire, and one inferior element, which is earth. The inferior element comes entirely from the mother. Servetus wrote: "There is nothing earthly in the foetus that comes from the father, it comes from the mother." The three other elements come from both father and mother.<sup>23</sup>

In the end, this almost becomes alchemy. Calvin commented on this matter:

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<sup>20</sup>Restitutio, 588-589.

<sup>21</sup>*De Trinitate*, 12.

<sup>22</sup>*Dialogorum de Trin. Libri.*, 4.

<sup>23</sup>Doumergue, vi, 239.



We can see how Servetus composes this Jesus Christ whom he imagines, for he makes God's essence distill from elements, as from a still; then he transforms this mixture into Christ's body.

This theory of Christ completely destroys the dogma of Incarnation, just as Servetus' doctrine of the absolute indivisibility of God abolishes the dogma of the Trinity. Similarly, the conception of an intelligible world which emanates from God by a law of necessity, and is reflected in the visible world, undermines the dogma of Creation.

However, it must be said that Servetus manifested a great piety towards Jesus Christ. He said that only in Christ can truth and eternity be found; in him only is the total plenitude of our integral salvation. Servetus' expressions of fervour and mystical piety are striking.<sup>24</sup>

#### *Servetus' conception of man*

Servetus denied the moral nature of man; he said that human affections, virtues and vices are nothing but the effects of external forces which act in us. We are nothing more than unconscious manifestations of divine thought. Our bodies are mere machines which various fluids cross and penetrate, maintaining in them light and life. This led Servetus to the idea that man cannot commit any mortal sin before the age of twenty. We have noted that Servetus violently rejected the doctrine of justification by faith. He was also very hostile toward infant baptism. To Calvin he wrote:

Your children cannot enter either by faith or by hope; they cannot be regenerated and as far as you are concerned, you are a thief and a bandit who does not introduce them by the door, that is by the door of faith.<sup>25</sup>

He urged Calvin not only to repent, but also to have himself rebaptized in order to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit.<sup>26</sup>

Since man, according to Servetus, cannot sin before the age of twenty and since there is no reason to baptize any one before he is in a state to commit sin, people should not be baptized before the age of twenty. Even twenty is too early, for Jesus was baptized at the age of thirty and Adam was born at the age of thirty! Calvin, with his customary logic, will show Servetus the contradiction of these words, for

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<sup>24</sup>Doumergue gives eloquent passages of this mystical piety (vi, 240-241).

<sup>25</sup>*Restitutio*, letter XV, 614.

<sup>26</sup>*Restitutio*, 615.

Servetus was not yet thirty when he published his book on the Trinity. "He wanted to be a prophet for every one. And now he does not want anyone to be considered a disciple of him if he has not reached the age of thirty."<sup>27</sup>

In the end, according to Servetus, the Christian truth was never exposed, not even in the New Testament, and the true — esoteric — tradition had been lost shortly after the writing of the New Testament. With Constantine (and the Council of Nicea) the true foundation of the church was destroyed. But after twelve-hundred sixty years the true order, found in Revelation 12:1-9, would be restored (around 1560). There is little doubt that Servetus considered himself to be the prophet destined to restore this lost truth.

### *Servetus and Calvin*

In the same way that Servetus had harrassed Oecolampadius, Bucer and Capiton, with his letters, he also harrassed Calvin, Melanchton and Viret from Vienne.

In 1546 he wrote a letter to Calvin, asking him three very long questions about the filiation of Jesus, about regeneration and about baptism. With much calm and moderation,<sup>28</sup> Calvin answered him with six pages.

In a second letter, Servetus attacked Calvin on his answers and asked him five new questions. This time, Calvin answered much more firmly in a letter of nineteen pages. In the following letters, Servetus harshly attacked Calvin:

you err completely . . . your absurdities do not move you . . . you do not understand anything (first letter).

I have often warned you not to admit in God this monstrosity of three things (third letter).

Your faith is sophistic, your reason is sophistic; which demon has taught you (ninth letter)?

With cunning you conceal the true faith of Christ (tenth letter).

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<sup>27</sup>Calvin, *Declaratio*, cited in Doumergue, vi, 247.

<sup>28</sup>Mosheim, an eighteenth century author who wrote several publications about Servetus, acknowledges the fact, cf. Doumergue, vi, 190.

It is with mad arguments that you condemn works; you blaspheme the works of the Holy Spirit . . . You get violently obstinate in your dreams . . . You are not born yet from heaven . . . you are evil and a blasphemer (twelfth letter).

[Y]our justification is satanic; leave your magic tricks . . . Your knowledge is proved ridiculous, or rather your fascination is magic and your justification is a lie (thirteenth letter).

[Y]ou understand neither faith in Christ nor the celestial kingdom (fourteenth letter).

According to your habit, you impudently abuse the sacred words; it is not worthy of an answer, for you argue with words forged according to your whims, which I hate . . . Your conclusion is quite inept (fifteenth letter).

Since you do not distinguish well between what is pagan, what is Jew and what is Christian, I will instruct you in a few words (nineteenth letter).

It seems to me that I hear a Moslem or a pseudo Jew (twenty-third letter).

During his trial in Geneva, Servetus often accused Calvin of being a liar, calling him "Simon the Sorcerer." It must be acknowledged that Calvin's answers were similarly harsh. For the moment, in his answers to Servetus' letters, Calvin wanted to teach him humility and felt forced to adopt a certain tone which was not customary with him, he said. Finally, he decided not to answer Servetus anymore, since he deemed he had better things to do. The Spanish physician was sending Calvin's books back to him with many annotations written in the margins. The Reformer later said that all his friends knew that he did not even take the trouble to read these annotations. On February 13, 1546, Calvin wrote to Farel:

Servetus recently wrote to me and he added to his letters a long volume of his frenzy, saying with a theatrical conceit that I would find there astounding things unheard of up to now. If it pleases me, he will come here. *But I do not want to give my word.* For if he comes and if my authority is worth anything, I will never bear that he go out of here alive.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>O.C. XII, 283.

This was clearly a threat. But the fact that Calvin was not ready to give his word that Servetus would be safe in Geneva, indicates that there was no premeditation.<sup>30</sup>

### *The publication of the Restitutio*

Servetus asked two brothers-in-law, both printers in Vienne, to do the work of publishing the *Restitutio*. The first man, Guérout, was a Libertine, hostile to Calvin. His brother-in-law, Arnoulet, was an evangelical favourable to Calvin. They later fell out with each other, because Arnoulet accused Guérout of having misled him as far as the content of the *Restitutio* was concerned. About a thousand copies of the book were printed and deposited in several places (Lyon included). Several of the depots were later burned, in Frankfurt for instance. Today, only three copies remain.

### *The trial of Servetus in Vienne*

Servetus was arrested in Vienne in the palace of the archbishop, after twenty years of a life led incognito. In his book, he had given a few hints about his identity. Later he accused Calvin of having been at the bottom of his denunciation, along with Guillaume de Trie. This accusation has been retained by many writers, but Calvin categorically denied it, saying,

It is hardly believable that we [Calvin and the Catholics of Vienne] would communicate by way of letters, and that those who get along with me as well as Belial with Jesus Christ, would plot with such a deadly enemy as if he were a companion. That is why there is no need to insist any longer in order to counter such a frivolous accusation, which will collapse once I will have said, in one word, that there was nothing of the sort. . . . If proof was given and it were objected to me that I denounced him in order to have him punished by anyone, I would not deny it, and I do not think that it would turn to my dishonour, seeing that I do not hide the fact that on my testimony he was arrested

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<sup>30</sup> According to Emerton, generally favorable toward Servetus, one should not grant too much importance to these words of Calvin, typical of sixteenth-century polemics. In the same way. Calvin wrote many times things like: "He is worthy of being spitted on his face," or "one should tear out his eyes," etc.

in this city [Geneva] in order to give an account of his evil doing.<sup>31</sup>

If Calvin were lying here, he would not be alone; all his friends in Geneva would be lying, since these words were published shortly after the Servetus case in Geneva, while all the other witnesses were alive. Many could have contradicted him publicly.

Actually, a friend of Calvin, Guillaume de Trie, because of his faith a French refugee in Geneva, was corresponding with his cousin Arneys, who had remained Catholic in Lyon. Arneys was trying to bring de Trie back to the Roman Catholic faith during that period. Lyon's jails were full of Reformed prisoners, waiting to be burned. While Arneys was accusing the Genevan ministers of being troublemakers and of creating disorder, de Trie, shocked, reacted by denouncing the city of Lyon for sheltering, in the palace of the archbishop, the biggest heretic of the century. De Trie disclosed the fact that Servetus was the author of the *Restitutio*, and sent his cousin four pages of a copy of this book, which was in his possession.

After Hyeronimus Bolsec, an enemy of Calvin and the author of a so-called "biography" of the Reformer which was full of calumnies,<sup>32</sup> many authors have accused Calvin of being the author of the letters of Guillaume de Trie in which Servetus-Villeneuve is identified. But as we have seen, at the time Calvin had decided not to pay any more attention to Servetus, deeming that the latter was diverting him from much more important occupations.

The fact is that de Trie simply wrote a private letter to his cousin, showing him a very clear example of Arneys' inconsequential argumentation against the people of Geneva. It was not a denunciation, but an argument during an exchange of letters. As we have just said, Calvin had been in possession of documents about Servetus for years already. He could have used them a long time before. In fact, the previous year, Tournon, cardinal of Lyon, had been in Geneva. Steps had been taken to intercede with him in favour of the five Reformed students who were

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<sup>31</sup>*Déclaration*, 53-54, cited in Doumergue, vi, 277.

<sup>32</sup>*Histoire de la vie, moeurs, actes, doctrine et mort de Jean Calvin, jadis ministre de Genève, receuilly par M. Ierosme Hermes Bolsec, docteur médecin à Lyon*. Lyon, 1577. In his "biography." Bolsec writes that Calvin, besides being a Sodomite, was addicted to all kinds of sensual pleasures (he would have died eaten up by lice and worms as a consequence of it, swearing, blaspheming and invoking the name of the devil). Besides, according to Bolsec, Calvin pretended to be able to resuscitate the dead, was avaricious, cruel and arrogant, and above all, ignorant!

prisoners in Lyon and Servetus could have been used in return for their liberation. As it was however, his name was never even mentioned.

In the meantime, the local Inquisitor decided to have an investigation made concerning Servetus. It led nowhere, since Servetus had time to hide all his writings. Asked about the book entitled *Christianismi Restitutio*, he confidently denied any connection. The printer had also hidden everything and no one seemed to know anything. So it appeared that de Trie had been frivolous in his assertion and now felt forced to supply other elements likely to prove what he had said. He insisted that Calvin should give to him Servetus' letters, the handwriting of which would have been sufficient proof of de Trie's allegation. De Trie later wrote that he had had to insist much before Calvin consented to give him these documents. According to de Trie, Calvin had argued that his task was to convince heretics by way of doctrine rather than with the sword of justice, which was not in his hands. In any case, these letters written by Servetus to Calvin had been published at the end of the *Restitutio*, in order to undermine Calvin's teaching and authority. They were thus not confidential, as so many writers have alleged.

Servetus was arrested on April 4, 1553, in Vienne. During his first cross-examination, after having sworn on the Bible to tell the truth, he claimed to be a good orthodox Roman Catholic. Then, confronted with the documents, he invented a story saying that he had written to Calvin twenty-five years earlier, while in Germany, borrowing the name of Servetus (whose books he had read) in order to discover whether he or Calvin could convince the other of being wrong. Calvin, according to this story, had accused him of being the Servetus whose name he was claiming to borrow; but he had answered that he was not Servetus.

Since the jailer had been ordered not to be too strict with Servetus (as a medical practitioner he had treated several high officials of the city of Vienne), Servetus managed to escape from the jail on the 7th of April. Later, it was conjectured that there had been a few benevolent negligences in this respect.

However, on the 17th of June, the following sentence was pronounced: besides being fined, Servetus was sentenced to be burned at the stake in public with his books as soon as he could be arrested. An effigy of him was burned in his place.

#### *Servetus in Geneva*

Servetus was arrested in Geneva on August 13, 1553. Between his escape from Vienne and his arrest in Geneva, four months had passed.

It is difficult to know whether he had arrived quickly in Geneva and stayed there incognito until his arrest. He later claimed not to have wished to stay in Geneva; he said he had been trying to go to Zürich, and had hidden himself in the meantime. Actually, this man, pretending to hide himself, had openly attended the service in the church of La Madeleine while Calvin was preaching. That is where he was recognized and immediately arrested.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, the question remains: what was his motivation for going to Geneva? Some hold that he was counting on the help of the Libertines who were hostile to Calvin (Perrin and Vandel). Some recall his ties with the printer Guérout. The ideas of Servetus had gained some favourable attention in Italy, where he finally intended to go. Still, Geneva was quite a detour from his journey to Italy. Therefore he must have had some very particular reason to go there. It is likely that the desire to compete with Calvin in his own city, at the moment when things were particularly difficult for the Reformer, was a strong motivation for Servetus. There he probably saw a chance to play the role that he had been dreaming to play, as his previous writings testify. There is no other consistent explanation for his going to Geneva.<sup>34</sup>

### *The trial of Michel Servetus in Geneva*

According to Genevan law, to arrest a man like Servetus in a case of criminal indictment involving corporal punishment, someone had to name himself the accuser and also be imprisoned along with the accused.<sup>35</sup> If the accused was found innocent, the accuser would have to undergo the punishment initially intended for the accused. Calvin asked his secretary, Nicolas de la Fontaine, to be the accuser. (De la Fontaine lived in Calvin's house and was a student in theology.) As we have noted, Calvin later publicly acknowledged in his *Declaration*<sup>36</sup> to have originated the accusation. De la Fontaine then had to give to the justice lieutenant, in a written form, the errors and appropriate passages found in Servetus' book. He provided thirty-eight of them. The lieutenant criminal (i.e., the examining judge) questioned Servetus in his

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<sup>33</sup>O.C. VIII, 725.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Emerton. 156-157.

<sup>35</sup>Order of 1529 and edicts of 12 November, 1542. Rillet, 1844. *Relation du procès criminel intenté à Genève, en 1553 contre Michel Servet* (In *Mémoires et documents de la Société d'histoire et d'archéologie de Genève*, tome III, Genève), 26.

<sup>36</sup>*Déclaration pour maintenir la vraie foy. . . contre les erreurs détestables de Michel Servet, 1564.*

jail about statements like: "the distinction in God's essence makes a devil with three heads, like Cerberus"; Melancthon is called "man without faith, son of the Devil, Belial and Satan"; those who believe in the Trinity are called "atheists."

In his answers, Servetus tried to exchange his role of the accused for that of the accuser, specifically accusing Calvin (of whom he said: "He errs in several passages"). He also made contradictory statements about his connection with Guérout.

Once the investigation was completed, the trial began (August 15, 1553). Right from the beginning, Servetus attacked Calvin, declaring that the latter had insulted him, while he had simply written to Calvin in order to show him his errors. He wanted to be given the opportunity to show Calvin his errors "in the midst of the congregation, with the help of convincing arguments and the authority of the Holy Scripture." It amounted to a sort of challenge, to a public duel of which Servetus seemed to have already dreamt of for a long time. In all likelihood he believed that the public, hostile to Calvin, would support him.<sup>37</sup>

Calvin was certainly not afraid of such a duel. He had proved in the past, with Hyeronimus Bolsec for instance, that he could easily win such a contest. That is precisely why his adversaries, the Libertines, did not wish to allow such a debate to take place, and prevented it from happening. Nicolas de la Fontaine, having sufficiently proved his accusations, was released from prison on bail. He chose Antoine Calvin, John Calvin's brother, to act as a guarantee.

On the sixteenth of August, the case continued with two other characters. One of them, Philibert Berthelier, a Libertine and enemy of Calvin, had been excommunicated for his repeatedly immoral behaviour and was trying to bypass the sentence of excommunication; he was acting as lieutenant general in the court. The other, Nicolas Colladon, a French refugee and close friend of Calvin, spoke as an advocate of Nicolas de la Fontaine (the accuser). The trial of Servetus seemed to become that of Calvin.<sup>38</sup> It is likely that there was a collusion between Berthelier and Servetus, since the next day, Calvin asks authorization to attend the debate.

On the seventeenth, Calvin as well as a few other persons attended the trial. He defended the inspiration of Moses' books and of Isaiah 53 against Servetus. The latter argued that Isaiah would have thought of

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<sup>37</sup>Cf. Rilliet, 364.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Rilliet, 37.



Cyrus according to the letter and to history, although the principal should be understood of Jesus Christ; this was made possible thanks to "the two meanings: one literal, the other mystical."<sup>39</sup>

During the case, Servetus' attitude sharply contrasted with the one he had showed in Vienne: very humble in Vienne, very arrogant in Geneva. For what reason did he retract nothing in Geneva, and why did he make no concession? He seemed to trust that he could rely on some connections in Geneva.

At this moment in the case, Calvin understood the situation. Until now, he had been trying to make Servetus retract some of his declarations. The case could easily have ended in another way rather than a death sentence. It would have been enough for Servetus to give some hope that he would change his attitude. He could even have displayed much less orthodox views than those he had shown when he swore to be a good Roman Catholic in Vienne. With a little humility, he could have saved his life. That is what Calvin later wrote in his *Déclaration*.<sup>40</sup> But the exact opposite happened, which points to the probability that the insults Servetus was addressing to Calvin were actually pleasant to a certain number of people.

Quite a few people who were either present during the case or heard about it, witnessed to that fact in their letters. Later, during the eighteenth century, people who had access to the documents (even though these people were generally hostile to Calvin) also had the strong impression that some of the Libertines had incited Servetus to act the way he had.<sup>41</sup>

It is also possible that pride played a role here: it was impossible for Servetus to retract his statements in front of the man whom he considered to be his great opponent.

On the twentieth of August, Calvin wrote to Farel: "I hope that there will be capital punishment, but I wish that the atrocity of the penalty would be remitted."<sup>42</sup>

The second phase of the case was now beginning. Servetus realized that his arrogant and violent attitude had not weakened Calvin, and that trying to debate with him in the public arena would not necessarily be

<sup>39</sup>O.C. VIII, 745.

<sup>40</sup>*Déclaration*, 55 (cited in Doumergue, vi, 319).

<sup>41</sup>Cf. Doumergue, vi, 320.

<sup>42</sup>"Spero capitale saltem fore iudicium: poena vero atrocitatem remitti cupio," O.C. XIV, 590. By "the atrocity of the penalty," Calvin meant, of course, "the stake."

beneficial. He became more moderate, more subtle and tried to present himself as inoffensive.

The trial, which had been stopped for three days, resumed on the twenty-first and seemed to shift from theological ground to the criminal ground. Thus, in his request on the twenty-second of August, Servetus protested against the death penalty for heretics as "a thing which was not known by the apostles and disciples of the ancient church." The Council shortly afterward decided to consult the other Swiss cities. Perhaps this was also done in order to weaken Calvin's position, since two years earlier during the case of Bolsec, the Swiss cities had advised moderation.

Servetus asked to be supplied with the books he needed for his defense, as well as with paper and ink, in order to write a request. This was granted to him.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, it was decided that he should be more strictly guarded (because of possible contacts with the outside?).

On the twenty-third, the closing speech for the prosecution was made: the accusation was now different from La Fontaine's original accusation. The theological debate was replaced by a political one, more concerned with the dangerous results of Servetus' opinions, and with his persistence in defending them. Calvin was relegated to the background.

Servetus asked for an advocate, but the public prosecutor refused to grant one to him, which, according to a Genevan edict of 1543, was legal: the Council could decide whether a request for an attorney by a defendant was justified or not. In the case of Servetus, some lies that he had told the court were the pretext for this refusal.<sup>44</sup>

The closing speech for the prosecution, by a certain Claude Rigot, has been attributed to Calvin, without any proof. This Rigot was still a Libertine, at least in 1548, which did not make him an obvious friend of Calvin.

Servetus answered that he never communicated his ideas with anyone in Geneva, which was an obvious lie, since he had written to Calvin and another minister, Abel Poupin. When accused of spreading confusion and trouble in the whole of Christendom, he feigned surprise and innocence, saying that on the contrary he had been doing Christendom a service, that he had not attacked anyone and that he was not aware of the fact that he had made any disciples. This was clearly false,

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<sup>43</sup>O.C. VIII, 752.

<sup>44</sup>O.C. VIII, 775.

since his book was a blatant declaration of war against all the churches of Christendom. Moreover, he had followers, at least in Italy.<sup>45</sup> The tactic of Servetus, faced with these accusations, was to try to appear as an inoffensive and unimportant person, which contradicted his temperament and previous attitude.

In the meantime, the court of Vienne had sent its jailer to bring Servetus back to Vienne. When asked whether he preferred to be brought back to Vienne or to be judged in Geneva, Servetus fell on his knees and begged with tears not to be sent back but to be judged where he was.

The third phase of the case was now starting; while in France the stakes of the Protestants grew in number despite Calvin's intercessions on the Protestants' behalf. In the meantime, Servetus was in Geneva, calling these confessing martyrs "atheists," and their God "Cerberus with three heads."

On Friday, September 1, the Council held a session. Philibert Berthelier, who had shown some collusion with Servetus, asked to be allowed to take part in communion, although he had been excommunicated. This was a new challenge for the authority of the Church and of Calvin. The president of the Petit Conseil was Ami Perrin, chief of the Libertines. He authorized Berthelier to participate in communion, if he felt at peace with his conscience. The whole system of church discipline established by Calvin threatened to be overthrown, despite his protest before the Council. This was precisely one of the goals of the Libertines. Holy Communion was to be celebrated two days later, on Sunday, September 3. For Calvin, the danger had never been so great. A few hours later, the case of Servetus resumed. Calvin faced all his adversaries: Perrin, Berthelier and Servetus. These men agreed that the discussion should continue in a written way — and in Latin. They also agreed that the case should be brought before all the Swiss cities.<sup>46</sup> Calvin was aware that this decision was mostly directed against him. On the seventh of September, he wrote to Bullinger:

In a short time, the Council will send you the opinions of Servetus, in order to get your advice about them. It is in spite of us that they cause you this trouble. But they have come to such a point of madness and fury that they hold suspicious anything that we say. Thus, if I were to claim that there is

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<sup>45</sup>Cf. Rilliet, 57.

<sup>46</sup>O.C., VIII, 751.

daylight at noon, they would immediately start doubting my words.<sup>47</sup>

However, Calvin accepted the proposition, and was asked to excerpt from Servetus' books certain statements concerning the matter. In the same decision, Servetus was allowed to retract anything that he would not uphold anymore. He was told that he might sustain with the help of God's Word anything that was unjustly condemned by Calvin, if he felt falsely accused.

That Friday evening Calvin hastily drew from Servetus' book thirty-eight propositions (written on six large pages). Then he tackled the Bertheliers affair again. He went to the members of the executive committee of the Council, the Syndics, and eventually forced their resistance: a new session of the Council was convened the next morning.

That Saturday morning Calvin fought to have the Council reverse its decision; he declared that he was ready to die rather than profane the Table of the Lord in such a shameful way. (Calvin's own account is corroborated by the minutes of the Council's register.) The Council maintained its decision of the previous day. For Berthelier, a friend of Servetus and an enemy of Calvin and of the Reformation, this was a triumph. However, after Calvin had left, the Council weakened and added to its decision a recommendation that Berthelier refrain from taking communion, at least publicly. But Calvin was not aware of this.

The fate of Calvin and of the Reformation was thus at stake on that Sunday morning of September 3, 1553, in the church of Saint Pierre. Calvin had decided to resist the Council. He intended to refuse to administer the sacrament of communion to Berthelier, even if he had to pay with his life for such a deed. Before the councillors, sitting in front of him in their wooden stalls, the Reformer uttered these words:

As to me, while God will have me stay here, since he has given to me constancy, and since I have taken it from Him, I shall make use of it, whatever happens, and I shall not govern myself in any other way than according to the rule of my Master, which is quite clear and well-known. Since we now are going to receive the Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ, if anyone tries to intrude on this table, though he has been defended by the Consistory to

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<sup>47</sup>O.C. XIV, 611.

do so, it is certain that at the cost of my life I will prove to be what I am commanded to be.<sup>48</sup>

In this moment of intense emotion, in front of the silent crowd, Calvin was risking much. But Berthelier did not appear at the Table; he had backed away.

By the third of September, Servetus had his answer to Calvin about the thirty-eight propositions, transmitted to him. Within two days, Calvin had to give a reply. Servetus' answer was full of insults, "Simon the Sorcerer, liar, you have lied, muddle-headed mind, criminal and murderer accuser, you are a wretch. . . ."

Meanwhile, the Council had not yet carried the matter before the other Swiss cities and seemed to be delaying in sending a messenger. The friends of Calvin (Beza, Bullinger, Viret, Farel) saw his situation as almost desperate and offered to come to Geneva to support him. As to Servetus in his jail cell, he gave way to his illusions. On the 15th of September, he addressed a new request to the Council. The previous one (of the twenty-second of August) had been moderate, but this one was less moderate: "You can see that Calvin has run out of ideas, not knowing what to say, and just for his pleasure he wants me to rot away in this jail." He reproached Calvin for the miserable condition in which he found himself: "The lice eat me alive, my chausses are torn, and I have no pourpoint nor shirt to change, except a bad one." However, it was not Calvin who was the syndic of Geneva, but Ami Perrin. In his conclusion, Servetus came closer to his goal, and asked permission to appear before the Council of the Two Hundred. He made himself an accuser, asking for the application of the *lex talionis* against Calvin.<sup>49</sup> For Servetus to have known the mode of functioning of this assembly, as well as its hostility to Calvin, he must have been informed from the outside. The jailer, Claude de Genève, a member of the party of the Libertines, was probably the intermediary used by Perrin and Berthelier.<sup>50</sup>

The Council, moved by the request of Servetus on his physical condition, decided to have chausses and necessary clothing made for him, but forgot to commission someone to execute the order; Servetus stayed in his miserable state. In addition, the majority of the Council,

<sup>48</sup>Cf. Doumergue, vi, 334.

<sup>49</sup>O.C. VIII, 797.

<sup>50</sup>A. Roget, a defender of Servetus during the nineteenth century, acknowledges that fact (cited in Doumergue, vi, 343).

jealously guarding its prerogatives, did not want to leave the case for the benefit of the Two Hundred.

On September twenty-second, in a new request, Servetus once more appealed to the *lex talionis* against Calvin. He asked that Calvin be

a detained prisoner like me, until the case is settled by the death of me or him, or any other penalty. And for so doing, I put myself down for the *lex talionis* against him, and will be content to die if he is not found guilty of this, as well as of other things I will charge him with. I beg for justice, my lords, justice, justice, justice. . . .<sup>51</sup>

Servetus recalled from his previous accusations, among others, that it is not the office of a minister of the gospel to be a criminal accuser, nor to prosecute in justice a man to death, since doctrinal matters are not subject to a criminal accusation.

Of Servetus' four "great and infallible" reasons why Calvin should be condemned, the fourth was that

to a great extent he is following the doctrine of Simon the Sorcerer, against all doctors who ever were in the Church. That is why, as the sorcerer that he is, he must not only be condemned, but also exterminated and chased away from your city. And his possessions must be attributed to me, as a compensation for the possessions that he made me lose.

Servetus waited thus in his prison. As his health was failing, he seemed to lose courage. On October 10th, he made a plea, and finally the Council decided to have clothes made for him.

In the meantime, the answers of the Swiss cities were arriving in Geneva. Not until September 21st, had a courier been sent to the cities of Zürich, Basel, Bern and Schaffouse (to both civil and ecclesiastical authorities). All the necessary documents had been sent to them (a copy of the *Restitutio* inter alia). Calvin had beforehand written to all his friends in these cities. Speaking of the Roman Catholic practice of burning at the stake, he wrote:

I confess that nothing would be less suitable than for us to imitate their furious intemperance. But there is a moderate way, so that the ungodly would not throw out all their blasphemies

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<sup>51</sup>O.C. VIII, 805.

against God with impunity, when there is a way to prevent them from doing so.<sup>52</sup>

First of all, Bullinger will set the tone: he felt that it was necessary to deal severely against Servetus, even though the choice of the penalty was left to the authorities of Geneva (so as not to offend susceptibilities). Without spelling things out, Bullinger was asking for the death penalty. On October 6th, the ministers of Schaffouse approved the position of Calvin and Bullinger.

Bern, generally opposed to Calvin, also followed Bullinger on September 26, through the voice of the minister Haller:

But what need is there to speak? This man is absolutely heretical, and the Church must be delivered from him.<sup>53</sup>

Again, on October 19,

Our response completely agrees with yours. When they heard the errors of Servetus, all the members of the Council shuddered, and I do not doubt that had he been detained in their prison, they would have sent him to the stake.

The opinion of Bern was the one which had the greatest influence on the judges of Servetus. Calvin himself acknowledged this fact later. On October 26, he wrote to Farel:

By common consent, all declared that Servetus renewed the impious errors with which Satan formerly troubled the Church, and that this monster must not be borne. The people of Basel are firm. Those of Zürich are the most vehement of all. The atrocity of his impieties is strongly emphasized by them, and they exhort our Council to deal with him severely. The people of Schaffouse approve. The ministers of Bern share this opinion, and there is a letter from the Council of Bern by which our people are greatly stimulated.<sup>54</sup>

Let us remember that Servetus had asked for the death penalty, either for himself or for Calvin. Let us also remember that with the support of the Libertines, he had made the Swiss churches his judges. Now the

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<sup>52</sup>O.C. XIV, 614.

<sup>53</sup>O.C. XIV, 627.

<sup>54</sup>O.C. XIV, 657.

Swiss churches unanimously answered that he should be sentenced to death.

The Genevan courier sent by the Council returned on October 18 with the response of the churches. The letters were translated, and on the twentieth, the Petit Conseil read them.

Put in a difficult position, the Libertines adjourned the discussion. Perrin pretended to be sick for three days. Finally a regular session was convoked.

In a letter to Bullinger dated October 25, Calvin was first of all concerned with the maintenance of church discipline in Geneva (in connection with the Berthelier affair). Concerning Servetus, he wrote: "As for what will happen to the man, it is not yet certain. As far as can be conjectured, the sentence will be pronounced tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow he will be led to the execution." The next day, Thursday, October 26, twenty members out of twenty-five being present at the Petit Conseil, Perrin made a last attempt in favor of Servetus, and asked that the matter be put before the Two Hundred. But he was not heeded, and Servetus was unanimously sentenced to death (*sine controversia*).

Of course, the question that immediately presents itself is: why did a majority which was so hostile to Calvin make such a decision?

In the Council, there were three parties: the right (the friends of Calvin), the left (the friends of Perrin) and the center (more hostile toward Calvin). The resistance that they showed against Calvin on the issue of excommunication proves that they were strong enough to save Servetus, if they had wished to do so. But they deemed it impolitic to fight against Calvin on a ground where he had the support of churches and states which they had to treat with diplomacy. In addition they were protecting themselves against possible suspicion of protecting a man seen by all to be a dangerous heretic. By acting ruthlessly toward him, they reserved for themselves the possibility of attacking Calvin later on the question of church discipline.

Servetus was thus sentenced to be taken to Champel the next day and to be burned alive there, with his books.

The sentence had hardly been pronounced when Calvin wrote to Farel, "Tomorrow, Servetus will be executed; we endeavored to change the mode of execution, but in vain. I will tell you by word of mouth why we did not obtain anything."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Cras ad supplicium ducetur; genus mortis conati sumus mutare sed frustra. O.C. XIV, 657.



The reason for taking such a step was to refrain from using the same means of execution employed by the Roman Inquisition toward Protestants. But the Seigniorship of Geneva did not see it in the same way. Canon law condemned people convicted of heresy to be burned and the Council followed the custom, without asking about the origin of the penalty. The Council was also following the sentence which had already been pronounced by the court of Vienne.

Calvin has been accused of having lied in this letter to Farel, but it must be recalled that two months earlier, he had already written to Farel: "I hope that Servetus will be sentenced to death, but I wish that the atrocity of the penalty would be remitted."

### *The execution*

When the announcement of his condemnation was brought to Servetus, it had a dreadful effect on him. Probably informed by Farel who had arrived to Geneva the night before, Calvin wrote, "At times he seemed stunned; then, he would utter sighs which resounded in the whole courtroom; sometimes he screamed like a madman. In short, he had no more composure than a demoniac. Toward the end, his cry became a repeated roar in Spanish: 'Misericordia, misericordia!'"<sup>56</sup>

Guillaume Farel witnessed the last moments of Servetus' life, and accompanied him to the stake. But beforehand, he wanted Servetus and Calvin to see each other, so that the two men would be reconciled. Farel did not succeed in having Servetus acknowledge his errors; Servetus asked him when Christ had been called Son of God before he was made man. With the authorization of the Council, accompanied by two councillors, Calvin went to visit Servetus in his prison. Servetus said that he wanted to ask mercy of Calvin. According to the Declaration, but also according to other testimonies by those who were present, Calvin calmly told him that he had never had any particular feeling of hate towards his person, that he had consented to meet him in Paris, and that he had tried every possible mean to bring him back on the right track; but Servetus had become embittered by his admonitions, and was full of rage and anger. Calvin then asked Servetus to leave aside his (Calvin's) person, and to ask for mercy from God, against whom he had blasphemed so much by trying to suppress the three Persons who are in His essence. Exhortations and prayers were useless; Servetus beat his breast, asked for mercy, invoked God, prayed to Christ and acknowl-

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<sup>56</sup>*Déclaration*, 55 (cited in Doumergue, vi, 356).

edged him as Saviour, but in Christ he acknowledged only the Son of God as man, in time. Since the meeting did not seem to lead anywhere, Calvin finally left.<sup>57</sup>

A little later, at about eleven o'clock in the morning, the prisoner was summoned and taken in front of the city hall, where a terribly long death sentence was read to him by a councillor; it began with fourteen items summing up his errors. When he heard the mention of death by fire, Servetus, terrified, shouted that if he had erred, it had been by mistake, that he had believed himself to be writing according to Scripture. He asked that the mode of execution be alleviated (which Calvin had already tried in vain to do for him).

Then he was taken to the place of the execution, called Champel, outside of the city. He was accompanied by Farel, surrounded by the archers and the Chief Lieutenant on his horse. To a few who exhorted him to acknowledge his errors, he declared that he was a victim and suffered unjustly, and he prayed to God to be merciful toward his accusers. Farel reproached him for trying to justify himself instead of edifying the crowd by asking the people to pray for him.

He asked for mercy for his errors, his ignorance, his sins, but never confessed Christ as the eternal Son of God. "Often," says Farel, "on our exhortation he prayed with us; he even asked the people who were there pray the Lord for him several times."

Having arrived at Champel, where the stake had been erected, he was tied, and before one o'clock, everything was over.

Servetus, who so often in his life had been a coward and had lied because he was afraid of death, died at the stake without renouncing his deepest convictions.

### *Conclusion*

We will pay no attention to ridiculous rumors which were spread shortly after these dramatic events, and which still circulate, one of them which portrays Calvin as a particularly cruel man who ordered that Servetus be burned with green wood, to make the torture last longer. Another rumor claims that Calvin had Servetus burned because the latter had discovered blood circulation, an unacceptable notion to an unscientific, medieval, clerical mind such as that, supposedly, of John Calvin.

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<sup>57</sup>Cf. Doumergue, vi. 357.

More seriously, it must be noted that in his Declaration, Calvin refused to grant Servetus the name of a martyr, because to him, the true martyrs, those he was corresponding with, always confessed joyfully their faith up to the very end. They did not keep quiet about it, as Servetus had done, even though nobody would have cut his tongue if he had spoken in such a way. Let us remember that many of the Huguenots had their tongues cut before their execution because they went to their stakes singing Psalms.

Nevertheless, the only heretic burned in Geneva during Calvin's time has remained a stain on the memory of the Reformer. Maybe the fact that Calvin, upon the insistence of some of his friends, wrote a treatise about Servetus' heretical teaching after the latter's death, played a major role in this respect. In this treatise, the French Reformer justified the death penalty for heretics such as the Spaniard.

However, it must also be noted that almost everyone during the 16th century believed that obstinate heretics should be punished by death. Servetus himself, though arguing in favor of tolerance with regard to doctrinal matters, did not hold to this principle when he asked the death penalty for Calvin. Even in the opinion of individuals favouring tolerance, such as Nicolaus Zurkinden, a man like Servetus was excluded from that tolerance. Others, like Sebastien Castellion, also preached tolerance, but it must be said that their enmity towards the person of Calvin played a definite role in their call for a different approach to the idea of freedom of conscience.

Ironically enough, another Genevan, Jean Jacques Rousseau (who is generally considered to be the antidote to Calvin) wrote in his *Contrat Social*, some two hundred years later, that in the ideal State to come, whoever would not believe the religious truths decreed by the legislator, should be banned from the State, and whoever, after having accepted these truths, stopped believing them, should be punished by death.

Let us simply conclude this essay by quoting the words that are written on the monument that was erected in Champel three hundred fifty years after Servetus' execution. It is a simple stone, without any statue.

Respectful and thankful  
sons  
of Calvin  
but condemning an error  
which was that of his time  
and firmly attached

to the freedom of conscience  
according to the true principles  
of the Reformation and the Gospel  
we have erected this expiatory monument  
on the 27th of October 1903.

*List of characters related to the Servetus' case*

Servetus, Michel , also Michel de Villeneuve

Calvin, Jehan

Arneys: de Trie's cousin; remained Catholic and lived in Lyon; he corresponded with his cousin.

Arnoulet: printer in Vienne; favorable to Calvin; collaborated with his brother-in-law Guérout for the printing of the *Restitutio*.

Berthelier, Philibert: member of the party of the Libertines; took part in the trial of Servetus; at the same time he tried to partake in the Holy Communion in spite of being excommunicated.

Bolsec: enemy of Calvin, banned from Geneva after a trial in 1551; published a slanderous biography of Calvin after the latter's death.

Bucer, Martin: Reformer of the city of Strasbourg.

Bullinger: Reformer of the city of Zürich.

Champier: French physician; initiated Servetus to medicine.

Colladon, Nicolas: friend of Calvin; took part in the trial of Servetus during the second day.

de Genève, Claude: jailer of Servetus in Geneva; member of the party of the Libertines.

de la Fontaine, Nicolas: secretary of Calvin; at the Reformer's request, he constituted himself accuser of Servetus.

de Trie, Guillaume: French Protestant refugee to Geneva; friend of Calvin; his correspondence with his cousin Arneys occasioned the arrest of Servetus in Vienne.

Farel, Guillaume: French Reformer; friend of Calvin; lived in the Swiss city of Neuchatel.

Fuchs: French Protestant botanist.

Guérout: printer in Vienne, cousin of Arnoullet; favorable to the Libertines; printed Servetus' book *Christianismi Restitutio*.

Haller: minister in the Swiss city of Bern.

Luther, Martin

Melanchton: German Reformer; friend of Luther and Calvin.

Oecolampadius: Reformer of the Swiss city of Basel.

Palmier, Pierre: archbishop of the city of Vienne.

Perrin, Ami: Chief of the party of the Libertines in Geneva.

Rigot, Claude: public prosecutor during Servetus trial in Geneva; member of the party of the Libertines.

Tournon: Cardinal of Lyon; visited Geneva in 1552.

Viret, Pierre: Swiss Reformer of the city of Lausanne.

Zwingli: Swiss Reformer of the city of Zürich.

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