

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Orientation to Michael Servetus

Michael Servetus (1509-1553) was condemned as a heretic, a blasphemer, and a seditious (for trying to bring disorder to the stable peace of Geneva) by both the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches, because of his views on the Trinity (blatantly denying the deity of Christ), and on infant baptism. He was burned on the stake by the Genevan Council on October 27, 1553. He was not content to keep his theological views to himself, but attempted to spread his system among the public through his published books, in order to convert others in the church as well as in society to his ideas.

Servetus was characterised as a wanderer in his short life of forty-four years.¹ He never settled down in one place, but lingered and pursued something indefinite and indeterminate. He had no scruples about despising those who disagreed with him, and thus was considered a troublemaker and a blasphemer in the eyes of Reformers.² What we know of his actual life depends entirely upon firstly his own testimony, delivered during his two trials, and secondly upon his surviving writings.

It is not easy to make a reasonable evaluation of his life without historical material on hand. This includes his confessions, which do not necessarily support his verity. The limited information rather encourages the development of individual opinions. Though, the facts indicate that he was a kind of theologian, a physician and an astrologer, also being a professor and an editor. He lived under the assumed name of Villeneuve. The surviving evidence indicates that he was possibly a genius, excelling in various areas and accomplishing several feats: in the field of medicine he discovered the pulmonary circulation of the blood; in the sciences he contributed significantly to the infant study of comparative geography and demography; as a theologian he helped lay an early foundation for modern scriptural exegesis. His interests were not restricted and also found expression in various proclamations made by him.

¹ "Like Bruno, Servetus was a wandering scholar." See Macdonell (1983:130).

² Irwin (1909:61).

A further complication in the reconstruction of Servetus' life is the limited, unreliable references to dates, which when given, sometimes oppose each other and at other times are changed to suit different situations.

Servetus held controversial discussions with several reformers and published several books, including some which were considered to contain heretical and blasphemous thoughts. Thus, he became known as an anti-Trinitarian, a heretic, and a blasphemer, who openly opposed the traditional doctrines such as infant baptism, justification and original sin. He entered public debate on these doctrines. Several leaders of the reformation debated or wrote against him, including: Philip Melancthon; Martin Bucer; Wolfgang Capito; Johannes Oecolampadius; and John Calvin. Servetus was not only condemned by the churches of Germany and Switzerland but was apprehended as a heretic at Vienne and condemned and executed in effigy by the inquisitors of the Roman Catholic Church on June 17, 1553. He escaped from the Catholic authorities, but was arrested again in Geneva on August 13, 1553. He was sentenced to death for heresy, blasphemy, and sedition on October 27 by the Council of Geneva.

1.2 Calvin's involvement

This study will not be focussing on Calvin's life (1509-1564). Rather the study will be focussing on his ministry in Geneva regarding Michael Servetus. Rather than elaborating on his training in law, in Roman Catholic Theology, or on his being influenced by Humanist thinkers, which would have had interesting implications had Calvin had a direct role in the trials and convictions of Servetus, this study will restrict its attention to Calvin's implied involvement in the Case of Michael Servetus.

Calvin was known as a religious leader and as the Great Reformer of Geneva in 1553. The allegations brought in against Calvin have dominated studies in the Case of Michael Servetus. It is therefore important to present a short orientation to the allegations brought in against Calvin. This orientation will assist us to understanding Michael Servetus, the man, who was a heretic, a blasphemer, and a seditious.

Such allegations against Calvin began with Sebastian Castellio³ and Camillo Renato⁴ shortly after Servetus' execution. Castellio, who was banished from Geneva in 1544, accused Calvin

³ Castellio is mentioned mainly in English biographers. His family name is Chatillion or Chateillon, but he preferred to be called 'Castellon'. See Buisson (1892:28). He was a professor of Greek at the University of Basel and a school teacher in Geneva under Calvin, and hoped to become office minister. Due to Calvin's refusal to recommend him to the civil council, he expressed both his views and resentment toward Calvin. He wrote a

of intolerance. Castellio wrote in several pamphlets, especially *De Haereticis an sint persecuendi*, which was published under the alias Martin Bellius. He was willing to stand up for Servetus and condemned Calvin for lacking Christian sympathy. A year after Servetus' death, in September, 1554, Camillo Renato, an Italian Anabaptist writer, wrote the following in his book *Carmen*:

O Calvin, that you have consigned to future generations a disgraceful deed and proof a demented state sent to the consuming flames? What spirit or reasons compelled you to such a dire crime, or what revelation of God's will prompted you to enter upon such a profanation, or what desire befitting heavenly peace? ...
... O Calvin, to be shut up in the dark shades of prison (walls) grieving, crying aloud, and at last, consumed, to fall in the midst of flames,— a dreadful deed that no age would forgive!⁵

In the indictment, he severely accuses Calvin, claiming that the act of burning Servetus was cruel and unchristian. Such accusations were raised in earnest again on the 350th anniversary of Servetus' trial, during the erection of his monument at Champel.⁶ The accusations rest on the presupposition that Calvin had a major influence on the Council and the government of Geneva. However, it is also possible to distinguish in Servetus' a personal hatred towards Calvin. Those who criticise Calvin, usually quote Servetus' statements or testimonies made during the trial at Geneva.

However, the accusations against Calvin are at variance with each other, are often ignorant of the actual facts, and the spirit of the age in question, and tend to be influenced by sentiment. It

treatise, *Concerning Heretics, Whether They Are to Be Persecuted* under the name of Martin Bellius in 1544, but he only gained disrepute. For Sebastian Castellio, see Bainton (1951:25-79). For Castellio's points on Calvin's role in the case against Servetus see Simpler (da:145); & Bainton (1963:177). For Zweig's defending sympathetically in favour of Servetus see Zweig (1936).

⁴ Camillo Renato (c. 1500-?1575), who was an originator of Italian Anabaptists, stood against Calvin. For more details on him, see Williams (1972:170-1 180 185-7 passim).

⁵ Camillo Renato, "Carmen", in Tedeschi (1965: 187). It was published in Traona on the first anniversary of Servetus' execution. But it is criticised that it was mingled "biblical and mythological allusions in a highly mannered humanistic Latin." (176). It is also contained in Calvin's *Opera* (vol. XV, 236-45).

⁶ See Besson (1903:3-4) & Jones (1983:72). The published dates of books that are quoted in this thesis are mainly between 1800 and 1930. The articles on the trial of Servetus published before 1844 are not trustworthy, when Rilliet de Candolle published *Relations du procès criminel intenté à Genève en 1553 contre M. Servet, rédigée d'après les documents originaux* (1844), because one could hardly find actual materials of examination on the affair of Servetus. For details see Whedon (1866: 609-12). In order to commemorate the 350th anniversary of Servetus' execution, the Protestants of France and of Switzerland erected a monument of Servetus at Champel on November 1 1903. The following inscription is written on its front: "FILS RESPECTUEUX ET RECONNAISSANTS DE CALVIN NOTRE GRAND REFORMATEUR MAIS CONDAMNANT UNE ERREUR QUI FUT CELLE DE SON SIECLE ET FERMENT ATTACHES A LALIBERTE SERVETUS CONSCIENCE SELON LES VRAIS PRINCIPES DE LA REFORMATION ET DE L'EVANGILE NOUS AVONS ELEVE CE MONUMENT EXPIATOIRE LE XXVII OCTOBRE MCMIII" (Dutiful and grateful followers of Calvin our great Reformer, yet condemning an error which was that of his age, and strongly attached to liberty of conscience, according to the true principles of the Reformation and of the Gospel, we have erected this expiatory monument. October 27 1903). The following inscription is written on the reverse side:

"Le xxvii Octobre MDLIII Mourut sur le bucher à Champel Michel Servet de villeneuve d'Aragon, né le xxix Septembre MDXI." See Emerton (1909:139); Wilbur (1932; 1969: xxvii-viii); Lindsay (1908:131).

is therefore obligatory that the actual facts of the trial of Servetus are scrutinised impartially and carefully, so as to judge the allegations fairly, and thus evaluate Calvin's role in Servetus' trial.

1.3 Probing the problem

The controversy surrounding Servetus is considered by some as "one of the most famous controversies of modern times about religious freedom" since the Reformation (Lecler 1960: 325). According to historian Jean Henri Merle D'Aubigne "there is no character in history more misunderstood than he" (D'Aubigne 1876: 102). Servetus is also depicted as a harsh leader of a Genevan theocracy. The historian, Roland Herbert Bainton, argues in connection with religious toleration that this affair is of paramount importance "because it served as the occasion for the rise in volume and intensity of the toleration controversy within Protestantism" (Bainton 1953: 3).⁷

This thesis wishes to investigate the "murder" of Servetus laid to Calvin's charge.⁸ It has been alleged that Calvin was responsible for arresting, condemning, sentencing, and executing Servetus. According to a number of allegations,⁹ Calvin could be held responsible and could be

⁷ This book was published to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Servetus' execution and is the most recent book on the whole affair of Michael Servetus. Bainton expounds a mediate view of interpreting Calvin's role in it, as well as religious toleration based on historical materials, demonstrating the past controversial issues. But he stands against Calvin's role. On religious toleration see Klauber (1995:482-4).

⁸ The Calvinist, Loraine Boettner, on reviewing Calvinism, says: "We must now consider an event in the life of Calvin which to a certain extent has cast a shadow over his fair name and which has exposed him to the charge of intolerance and persecution. We refer to the death of Servetus which occurred in Geneva during the period of Calvin's work there. That it was a mistake is admitted by all. History knows only one spotless being-the Savior of sinners. All others have marks of infirmity written which forbid idolatry" (1954: 412).

⁹ There were the two major theological disputes during Calvin's career in Geneva, especially between 1541 and 1555. One had to do with Jérôme Bolsec, who was banished from Geneva in December 1551, because of his views on predestination. Afterwards, he, a former Roman Catholic theologian, stood at the forefront of those insulting and blaming Calvin' intolerance about the trial of Servetus. He blatantly insulted Calvin as "intractable, cruel, bloodthirsty, and covetous (3-4, 11) ... he expanded that list to include his being ambitious (12-3), extravagant (14), unchaste (15), filled with hatred (15-20)" in his book, *Vie de Calvin*. He had no scruple on insulting Calvin as a "heretic." See Holtrop (1993:787). For another criticism see 218-29. Holtrop is the well known scholar on the case of Bolsec. See also, Wright (1806:13-6). He eloquently and poetically insulted and made cynical marks on Calvin: "O Calvin! Is this the influence of thy boasted doctrines of grace? Is this thy spirit of reformation? ... Conducting a criminal prosecution against him, merely for his opinions, that thou mayest bring him to an ignominious death! O Shame! O cruel man! Will nothing but his blood satisfy thee? Must thou trample upon his ashes before thy wrath can be appeased? O tell it not at Rome! Publish it not in the court of Inquisition! Lest the persecuting papists rejoice, lest the lords inquisitors triumph, and say 'the protestants are persecutors as well as we! ... Who are the instigators and perpetrators of this barbarous deed? Is it at Rome, or in Spain, under the direction of popish priests, and agents of the bloody Inquisition? No. 'its at Geneva! protestant Geneva! Where Calvin's influence is paramount to the civil authority... O bigot! Thou monster! What hast thou done? ... Infernal deed! O Calvin! What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth from the ground. But see, the blessed martyr is fallen down in the midst of the fire, his life is departed, the conflict is over, his sufferings are for ever terminated. We weep, feel indignant at the conduct of Calvin, and retire." See Harnack (1899:134-5): "He had Servete burnt, and by his powerful words the other Swiss Cantons, where there was originally (especially in Bâsle) a more liberal judgement, were kept from showing toleration and were brought round to accept his strict principle." Wileman (u.d.:100-1) suggests three kinds of questions on Calvin's role in the trial of Servetus: "First,

guilty of intolerance, thus sharing in the shame of the Vienne trial of Servetus. Calvin helped formulate the charge and provided crucial evidence, which led to Servetus' arrest. It is also alleged that Calvin had a say in the administration of Servetus' punishment. In addition, in the alleged charges against Calvin, regarding Servetus' accusations, condemnation, and execution, Calvin is pictured as, not only a cruel monster, but is also called the "principal blood hound" (Lex Naturæ 1892:22).

1.4 Problem Formulation

The main question in this thesis wishes to ask: Who was Michael Servetus really?

The two supporting questions, which are used to give direction to the main question are: Did Servetus deserve to die as a criminal by burning on the stake in 1553? And: What was Calvin's involvement in the Case?

The following questions have also been raised by this study:

What was Calvin's actual role in the trial of Michael Servetus?

Was Calvin directly or primarily indirectly involved in the trial?

Why was Calvin reluctantly involved in the trial?

In order to support the main question the following subsidiary questions are required:

What crimes did Servetus commit to be charged with heresy, blasphemy, and sedition?¹⁰

Who was lawfully in charge of the sentencing and the execution during the trials?

What were the trials actually like?

If Calvin indirectly shared in the trials, to what extent was he related to them?

1.5 Hypothesis

Michael Servetus was a heretic and a seditious, but was unfortunate to be condemned. His teachings and sentencing should be reflected upon within the context of the sixteenth century,

the Roman Catholics, who may judge it to be an unanswerable taunt to a Protestant. Second, those who are not in accord with the great doctrines of grace, as taught by Paul and Calvin, and embraced and loved by thousands still. Then there is a third kind of person who can only be described as ill-informed. It is always desirable, and often useful, to really know something of what one professes to know." He criticises the three groups, especially the third saying, "they have to confess that they never at any time read a line about the matter." He read the reprinted version of Servetus' last book, *CR*, in 1790.

¹⁰ Penning points out in his evaluation of Servetus' execution, that "we feel entitled to ask if it is right to mention an error of Calvin's age without making mention an error of Michel Servet" (1954:218).

and not the twentieth century. However, he was treated and tried very fairly within the context of the sixteenth century, by both the Inquisitor at Vienne and the civil council of Geneva, and was exploited as a sacrifice by his defenders in the end.

Servetus' death was not condemned by Calvin, neither was he involved in his sentencing. Calvin was not involved in the trial of Vienne, but is involved by implication. The civil council of Geneva must be held responsible for the sentencing and punishment of Michael Servetus. Calvin's role is restricted to that of a religious observer and witness to the Geneva trial proceedings. Calvin's writings were used in both trials, but this would still not implicate him. His personal involvement in the trial at Geneva was restricted to a rejected consultation, in which he pleaded that Servetus be decapitated instead of being burnt.

It is our duty to re-examine the allegations that have been brought against Calvin in both the recent and distant past in his role in the trial of Servetus (Luck 1963:195-6).¹¹

1.6 Study goals

As a doctoral thesis the research conducted in this study wishes to present a new perspective which will help in evaluating the allegations brought in against Calvin on Servetus' charge. This study wishes to indicate that previous studies on the Case of Michael Servetus have not been based on either the broader information, which is available, nor on the actual facts pertaining to the trials and sentencing. This is set as goal in order to come to a better understanding of Michael Servetus. It will thus be able to re-evaluate the Case fairly and impartially.

1.7 Methodology

In order to determine the identity of Michael Servetus, as well as establishing the extent of Calvin's involvement in the implicated trials, this study will be consulting primarily primary sources. Servetus' works deal principally with his theology, where Calvin's letters and essays deal more specifically with the court circumstances in Vienne and Geneva.

A critical analysis of the two main sources, *De Trinitatis Erroribus*, and *Christianismi Restitutio*, will clarify vague points on Servetus' thoughts and trials. The critical analysis will

¹¹ The publication was published to commemorate the thirty years of publican from 1934 to 1963 by Dallas Theological Seminary.

make it possible to present a chronological demonstration of Servetus' theology, and then specifically his anti-Trinitarianism and anti-baptism trends.

Chapter one is devoted to a general orientation, in which the problems to be investigated are formulated, along with a hypothesis. In chapter two secondary sources will be consulted to reconstruct Servetus' biography. The complexity of Calvin's alleged involvement in the trials will be illustrated through the reconstruction of Servetus' biography. The secondary sources contain several allegations directed against Calvin's person, making it necessary to unravel these allegations and disputes in order to determine a reconstruction of Servetus' life. The complicating factors, which make the description of Servetus' life difficult, will receive particular attention. These are both chronological and doctrinal issues.

A doctrinal study of Servetus' teachings in chapter three will combine the use of secondary and primary sources. A sociological analysis of the civil system in sixteenth century Geneva is conducted to determine the relations between the ecclesiastic and civil authorities. Calvin's position in and influence on the civil system could thus be deduced. This has specific implications for assessing Calvin's involvement in Servetus' two trials, and evaluating Servetus' theology as spiritual reflection, as expressed in the two principle sources.

Chapter four makes use of a textual and critical analysis of the court proceedings, the related correspondence, and reflects on the trials objectively. The principle attention in the thesis falls on the deconstruction of the two trials, and thus the preceding chapters serve as orientation to distinguish between matters that cloud a correct assessment of the Servetus Case. A new perspective on the disputes between Calvin and Servetus is thus presented and evaluated. It is thus possible to compare Servetus' own testimonies and to determine Calvin's role in the trial proceedings. It would thus be possible to assess which party is responsible for Servetus' conviction and sentencing.

A summary of the findings is presented in the Conclusion, which is made to arrive at a concrete argument in which the hypothesis presented in the Introduction can be tested, and a answer to the posed question can be formulated.