

Was Calvin Really the Innocent Man

Reformists want him to be?

I don't think so. And many will agree with me, however, what keeps this innocent mask on Calvin's face, is definitely those who follow in his tradition believing in him regardless the full story.

Fact is, although Calvin's popularity dwindled in later times – he was fairly young when he died (in his fifties) - he was a man of great influence for the Reformation was, at the time, in full swing and he made good use of his many contacts, also among higher society, for Calvin appears to have been a man who could see an opportunity and he would definitely then have done everything possible for the sake of his clerical leadership position in Geneva. His influence was, however, not restricted to Geneva – he settled in Geneva in 1553, however, only receiving his citizenship according to some sources by 1559.

Calvin's arrival in Geneva then seemingly coincided with Servetus' arrest – if these dates are correct - and this is important to keep in mind for, naturally, Calvin would still have been busy settling down in his new environment and which was in all probability a haven for all who tried to find a new safe place for themselves due to the persecutions at the time in sway. However, what cannot be overlooked is the way Calvin had gone about having Servetus imprisoned as well as exposed to his enemies previously and then again in Geneva.

There were then two crucial times pointing to Calvin as perpetrator of Servetus, and as it also appears, done in a subtle way. We should also keep in mind that Servetus did not plan going to Geneva – as is often said – and he would therefore not have gone to “Calvin's Geneva” had he not missed his boat. It is said that Servetus was on his way to Naples where he was going to make his living as a medical doctor.

It is often said that Calvin tried his best to bring Servetus to his senses – in other words to accept his Trinitarian doctrine and which was of course totally in line with Catholicism's Trinity for Calvin, unlike Servetus, had opted for a Reformation stance, however, it was a doctrinal approach that basically followed in the steps of Catholicism, and therefore the Trinity and infant baptism were faithfully adhered to – he initially tried to reform the Church and this of course gave him an excellent opportunity to cooperate with the Catholics. Unlike Servetus, he then made no effort to question the Trinity, the main doctrine of the Mother Church, meaning that he had none of the type of hardship Servetus had to cope with for the sake of his convictions.

As Anabaptist Servetus would definitely have tried to convince Calvin of his newly found doctrinal insights in the Scriptures – which he, logically spoken, had a right to enact just as any Reformer of his day also have had. Besides, the gospel of Christ was open to one and all since the birth of Christianity up until clerical restrictions were placed over time on the free exchange thereof by the Mother Church. However, the Renaissance brought not only enlightenment but it also culminated in a renewed search for Biblical truth, leading to the emergence of new interpretations of Scripture, the planting of new ideas and the formation of mainly Protestant, Calvinist and Anabaptist churches.

Erasmus had made a very strong impact with his new textual discovery concerning the original Greek MS (1 Jn 5.7) – he was ordered by the Pope to make a new translation based on the Greek original MS, discovered in Constantinople at the time and this seems to have spurred Servetus on to reinvestigate the Scriptures. The humanist movement was set in motion with Erasmus' appearance on the scene and this allowed for greater freedom of thought and speech and which of course brought enlightenment to a world that was still drenched in traditional thought and practice. Intolerance was still heavily in sway to anything outside the parameters of the main religious beliefs of the day, especially relating to the Trinity, and therefore 1 Jn 5.7 is still in the *Textus Receptus* - the Latin tradition that had never lost its grip on Christianity.

All that was demanded, however, of the new leadership emerging at the time, was to show their courage, one by one, boldly stepping forward with new interpretations of and insights in the Scriptures and which of course rapidly became the order of the day. But everything came with a price and many walked the way of martyrdom, sealing their faith in God with their own blood for the lid of religious suppression was still heavily in place. Servetus, equipped with great intelligence and boldness of spirit, of course had a right to also spread his viewpoints, just as Calvin also had, the only difference is that Servetus was from the Anabaptists, a movement known for its radical, however, also truthful ideas on Scripture.

Now apart from Calvin's faithfulness to infant baptism and the Trinity, he of course also denied baptism with Holy Spirit, something some of the Anabaptists adhered to and which was of course downright rejected by Calvin who strongly relied on following, in this instance, also closely in the footsteps of, once again, that very Church whose practices he initially tried to reform. Calvin can be regarded as the father of “predestination”, a debatable doctrine also rejected by Servetus and of course for sound, Scriptural reasons. Now, without going into Calvin's doctrinal viewpoints further, let me give my reasons believing that he was guilty of Servetus' death.

Should we believe the idea that the municipal officers of Geneva had the full and final say in the condemnation and martyrdom of Servetus, does this mean that Calvin had absolutely no say in Servetus' sad fate? It is said that he tried hard to negotiate with Servetus to renounce his ideas on the Trinity, which was of course everywhere in place at the time, however, why did Calvin had Servetus arrested *in his own church*? - Servetus had missed his boat to his planned destination (Napels) opting willingly, and in friendly manner, to attend Calvin's church service on that fatal Sunday knowing all too well that Calvin differed from him doctrinally, also that Calvin was in tight collaboration with some of the Catholic leadership concerning his planned arrest, and of course set in motion in reaction to his religious writings on the Trinity he so vehemently rejected.

It seems Servetus held no real grudges against Calvin else he would not have gone to his church, something that cannot be said of Calvin and undoubtedly because of Servetus' antitrinitarian doctrine which was of course the mighty weapon he had wielded against Servetus, however, simultaneously ensuring his own safety - not meaning here that Calvin held on to the Trinity with such ulterior motive in mind but implicitly making good use of this very important “worldview” confession of faith and in which he unshakably believed. It was so strongly imprinted on the minds of humankind, done over centuries of indoctrination by the mighty clergy, that few dared to question this theological mystery, and Servetus' radical attack on the Trinitarian doctrine was of course also the reason why he was labelled a “liar” - for a good account of Servetus' trial and the laws used against him, also how the claim of imprisonment and execution was brought against him, consult the website given below¹.

The big question is : Why could'nt Calvin not at least have tried to let Servetus escape,

¹<http://www.miguelservet.org/servetus/trial.htm>

helping someone who was, at a time, apparently quite close to him² Surely an attempt on Calvin's side to do so, would have changed the idea that Calvin was guilty. But he, the very important innovative theologian (who seems to have leaned heavily on his partner, Beza, for assistance and who seemingly was the more knowledgeable of the two) gave the fatal sign to his police to arrest Servetus and all done within a Church, the precincts whereof supposedly being there to help, even protect, the fugitive! All done on top of it while Calvin was preaching the *Christian* message! Didn't the merciful God provide free cities for this very purpose (in ancient Israel)?

However, Calvin who had sworn that if Servetus was ever to put his feet in Geneva, he was going to have him arrested, gave the fatal sign for Servetus' arrest to his own attendant police and naturally resulting in his many months of incarceration in a cold Geneva prison (a plan Servetus had not known of else he would have thought twice before making his appearance in Calvin's Church – it was, as it appears, said to Farel by Calvin. Some sources claim that he was in prison for six months whilst the more recent ones say two months (August to October).

The big question here of course is: Had Calvin not been influential enough to plan an escape route for Servetus instead? But it is as if he grabbed the opportunity to have Servetus arrested just as he had intended doing (this move is as clear as day light) and with the purpose of course *to have him executed*. Therefore the verdict many still hold to this day, namely that Calvin was guilty of Servetus' unnecessary and extremely painful death – burning to death on a stake by slow fire (!) and all done in the Name of the Trinity (rf 5).

The question then remains: Why didn't Calvin at least try to help Servetus die by the sword instead, had he indeed been compelled by higher authority in Geneva to see to Servetus' execution? Keep in mind that Calvin co-signed the death warrant and we should then ask ourselves objectively: Why defend Calvin wanting him to be *declared* innocent and just because the sentence was passed *also* by Calvin this way? Couldn't the influential theologian in Geneva have schemed something to at least alleviate Servetus' foreseeable painful death? This is with the idea in mind that Calvin was not in the least guilty. The whole trial in Geneva of Servetus therefore indeed speaks of thickening the plot against him! None of the pleas of the prisoner were granted, proving strong bias and even coercion.

It is often said that Calvin did not have the exclusive say in Servetus' execution, but, surely, he had enough doctrinal say to condemn him in the Name of the Trinity (rf Footnote 5), proving his clerical power. Calvin had without a trace of doubt clearly more influence with the municipal officers than we are made to believe! Had he not handed Servetus initially over to the French Inquisition (as it seems and therefore not the Spanish Inquisition as was said), Servetus' trial in Geneva would perhaps have been different for it was his first exposure as pseudonym author of antitrinitarian literature, namely to the Inquisition, that made him guilty in the eyes of Europe and everywhere in the Christian world.

Had Calvin then still be a staunch Catholic who had organized Servetus arrests (twice) and his execution, then the whole claim against him would easily have been dropped for persecution by the Catholics against heretics had always been in sway but he persecuted Servetus as a “Protestant” – yet still collaborating at the time with the Catholic Church he initially wanted to reform – the only difference being that Calvin stood firmly on the Trinity *and* having had a safe haven in Geneva where he could dictate his own theology. It were the Anabaptists of Geneva who were ruthlessly attacked and persecuted on all sides (Bonhoefer wrote an excellent book on the Anabaptists).

There is also the idea often wedged in, namely that Servetus was making a nuisance of

² Calvyn, J., *Institusie van die Christelike Godsdienst*; CJBF, Potchefstroom, 1984; Vol 1-4.

himself, sending umpteenth letters to Calvin at a stage, however, shouldn't we objectify things here for only then will we be able to arrive at *truth*. It doesn't seem that Servetus was a man who would write nonsensical things to a colleague (one on his own level since varsity days) – he was obviously a very industrious, innovative type of personality not wanting to waste his time on trivialities - and therefore it rather seems that he was anxious to retrieve his loaned (!) MS from Calvin who, in return, treacherously had handed it over to the Inquisition - leading of course to Servetus' first arrest by the Inquisition because of his antitrinitarianism. However, Servetus had miraculously and timely managed to escape from their iron clutches. His brother was a Catholic priest.

Did he perhaps help with his escape? We will never know but God was clearly with Servetus. This is a logical conclusion for landing in the hands of the Inquisition was like landing in iron clutches. Those acquainted with the Spanish Inquisition will know the terrible fate of especially the Jews - Servetus' mother was of Jewish descent and if we study the history of the Hebrew Nazarenes, one also sees a trail of blood following them everywhere.

A logical conclusion would be that Servetus, as every person in his right mind would have done, feared the Inquisition's extreme torture methods – and which would most certainly have had the same effect on Calvin, therefore he also had his own days of frantic fleeing from persecution and which cannot be denied – before he succeeded Farel in Geneva. Servetus was then, as any sane person would have done, perhaps been trying to get his MS back in order to prevent Calvin from exposing him again to the Inquisition. He shouldn't of course have trusted Calvin, in the first instance, with his MS – may be proving naivety on his part or even impulsiveness (?) – else he must have, in the interim, heard that Calvin was behind his first arrest and exposure to the Inquisition. We do not know as it seems we do not have all the facts before us – I have never come across a source admitting this. With the aforementioned in mind, why did Servetus not avoid Calvin when he missed his boat to Naples?

Could it perhaps be that he relied on Calvin's “Christian” conduct, also that he was not expecting such brutish act from Calvin, relying then, once again, on “forgiveness” and condonement, but he attended the church of his “friend” according to some sources, proving that Calvin, up until that stage, hadn't yet revealed his intention to have Servetus executed (admitting this to him personally or to anybody else excepting Farel and that Servetus was under the impression that his previous arrest enacted by the Inquisition was done solely by the Catholic Church). But the fact that Servetus was on his way to Naples is proof thereof that he was either in a hurry to reach his destination, or that he had no intention whatsoever to pay Calvin a visit, implying that his visit was matter-of-fact.

Although the two protagonists then in the past had clashed on the Trinity, it seems at that earlier stage in their liaisons, both had allowed for difference of opinion, meaning that Calvin could still tolerate Servetus' beliefs and presumably because Servetus was regarded (at a time at least) as his senior - (see rf Footnote 2 for a strange remark passed by Beza on his acquaintance with Servetus in his student days referring to him as the “Spaniard”).

It seems we will never know the full story as it is as though the mighty Calvin's real share in Servetus' death is rationalized due to his large following, also to his very strong contribution to the Reformation, and therefore Servetus is often, and very conveniently, presented as the out-of-control, foolish, aggressive, unstable guy who loved hopping from one interest to the other, never focusing on one subject like Calvin clearly did, always lying about what he says, impatient and aggressively attacking Calvin in doctrinal argumentation, whilst the latter is depicted as the friendly, congenial, lovable, tolerant personality trying to appease his opponent (as depicted in some reliefs at our disposal). Of course the total opposite of how Beza experienced Calvin, yet ever so

cautiously done (!). It is said that Servetus did everything possible to visit Calvin in Geneva, however, weren't there many Anabaptists he could have visited too, that is if he had wanted to be in Geneva? But he opted for Naples instead *and with a definite purpose in mind*.

Sneering reference is sometimes made to Servetus not having been able to keep an appointment – he seemingly lost or overlooked one with Calvin not pitching, however, aren't appointments sometimes unintentionally broken? Isn't this a human factor? And what made Calvin so much more important than Servetus who clearly had his own record of academic and societal prestige and achievements? Besides, Calvin was no king or mighty ruler whose royal appointments would indeed have been of far greater importance than meeting an acquaintance like Calvin indeed was for Servetus! Fact is, Servetus was often a fugitive and this type of forced lifestyle (for the sake of Christ) had perhaps by then taken its toll on him. So this type of petty argumentation against Servetus, a mere human being – in relation to Calvin who was undisturbedly living in Geneva – is a good sign of how rigidity can blur one's senses and especially painted with religious prejudice.

However, it seems something special done by Servetus must have geared Calvin to have Servetus finally removed from society and that must have been after Calvin's reading of Servetus' MSS, and especially his passing of the crucial remark that must have nailed him to his coffin, namely of the “three-headed monster” - seemingly seen in Madrid by Servetus and which is indeed a crude depiction of the primitive trias, perhaps also a consequence of Erasmus' findings on 1 Jn 5.7 – compelling Calvin to react and what he of course would have labelled as “blasphemous”.

So, instead of thinking deeper than a sixteenth century approach to the Trinity, Calvin just went ahead downplaying Servetus and seemingly, in his opinion, for Servetus' lack of insight - which this type of explication and such depiction of the Trinity indeed would have been, proving of course that Servetus, in all honesty, was ahead of his times for this type of iconoclasm, presenting the existence of God Most High in such a crude way, indeed is unbiblical and blasphemous! It is paganism through and through, and if not, what can ever be closer thereto?

Relying then on their earlier friendship (while, e.g. studying law in Paris) seems to have been a naïve move on Servetus' part. Or Calvin's antagonism against Servetus must have flared up after the latter's strong standing on the rejection of the Trinitarian doctrine. Whatever the case then may be, Calvin was, since his move to Geneva, bent on getting rid of Servetus. It does not, however, seem that Servetus was in any way trying to curry favour with Calvin wanting at all cost to keep contact with the unbending theologian or to visit him in Geneva.

What could rather be is that he thought that, while virtually trapped in Geneva that fatal weekend (due to circumstances not of his own doing), he could perhaps meet Calvin face to face in the love of Christ! The question here is : Why would a strongwilled personality like Servetus so willingly approach his *enemy* had he known his life was in the utmost of danger? Besides, he escaped from the Inquisition's prison and he, the brave outspoken writer of radical tracts against the evergreen Trinity, must therefore have known all too well also how to tread cautiously on dangerous ground! And danger was lurking against him on all sides, however, not because he was a criminal but because of his love for his newfound Scriptural truth! If this is not a sign of moral character, then what is it?

Servetus must then oftentimes have changed his pseudonym and place of writing not because he was unstable but maybe serving as proof that he was terribly and constantly under huge threat and the only way to evade his pursuers was perhaps to avoid having all his tracts easily traced back to himself – unless sent to a friend whom he knew would not have betrayed him. And this then again points to Calvin's subtlety and who was clearly not in his heart a friend of Servetus! It seems, concerning Servetus' relation to Calvin, that he was naïve or just overly enthusiastic

trying to sway the staunch Calvin's belief in a trinitarian God. So why didn't he avoid Calvin's Geneva? Fact is, he didn't and that was why, on the very last boat trip he was ever to take again, heading for Naples, not Geneva!

Besides, he was entitled to spread the gospel just as anybody else indeed was, the only difference, logically, is that his challenges were far greater than those of Calvin – considering his stand against the untouchable Trinitarian doctrine. Torture methods would have been a deterrent to every one proclaiming the Christian message in a “heretical” way – as Servetus was indeed accused of. Calvin, on the other hand, had honed himself a safe refuge in Geneva, therefore one can never judge the two protagonists the same way.

It is true that Servetus was condemned not only by Calvin and his followers, but had Calvin made room for alternative viewpoints on Christological issues – propagating lenience considering the history of this doctrinal viewpoint and making allowance for objectifying it in the true spirit of Renaissance - the picture would perhaps have been different for Servetus. But he made no effort whatsoever to tolerate new approaches to Godhead, and which Servetus must have been acquainted with! Fact is, Calvin went along with mainstream doctrine whilst Servetus stood squarely against it. The latter also believed in a full return to first-century apostolic worship which meant a radical change and not then only relating to doctrinal declarations. As the Trinity is still extremely strong within society to this very day, prejudice against Servetus will naturally also remain.

Why did Calvin hate Servetus so deeply, calling him all kinds of derogatory names - anybody who is acquainted with Calvin's history will know that this is a truthful statement (rf Footnote 2) - had he been innocent? Fact is, the hate speech this father of Calvinist Reformation thoroughly aimed at Servetus, cannot be regarded as “innocent” for as a man thinks in his heart, so is he indeed!

Whatever is in the heart then usually comes out on the tongue and Calvin was clearly, with this kind of angry speech in mind, bent on doing Servetus great harm, something that anybody remaining objective and honest at heart, will agree with, not trying to rationalize Servetus' horrendous death and as if Calvin was innocent. Fact is, Calvin premeditated the death (execution) of Servetus - not as a criminal though but contemplating his removal from society because of the rejection of Calvin's own doctrinal truth – and which evil deed can indeed be seen as “murder” – plotting against somebody's life deserves this type of label. Jesus never made room for the robbing of somebody's life. Calvin must have known that the municipal officers of Geneva were not going to condone Servetus' viewpoints.

Although having had somebody killed in those days for the sake of Church doctrine, was not regarded as “murder”, it in effect boils down to killing somebody, to curtail a person's life by having that person forcibly removed from society not for a criminal deed done but killing or slaying him for, e.g., difference of opinion even because of ethnicity. “Murder” according to the *English Dictionary* is “slaying” or “execution”. And all done in the Name of God against a person who had a right to his own ideas on especially God's existence.

Servetus was without the slightest bit of doubt a deep believer in the Word of God and he was also clearly dedicated to God – he sang spiritual songs whilst burning slowly to death until the smoke had silenced his voice, as it appears trying to focus on God and not his pain and proving then to us his deep walk with Jesus Christ. A sure sign of utmost behavioural control only his God could have infused in him! The martyrs will, surely, have preeminence in heaven one day (*Book of Revelations*).

It is further said that Calvin, on the *night* of Servetus' execution (!) went home as if nothing

had happened! Now, if this is not insensitive (evil) to the utmost extent, what else is such an apathetic attitude? Also, if the municipal officers of Geneva had the last say, why was Servetus burned at night and not during the day for in those days (a very popular parallel normally drawn) people were used to having “misfits” (heretics) burned on the stake in broad daylight. He was burned on a hill outside Geneva (rf Footnote 1).

However, Servetus was burned this way (at night), as it seems, to avoid general unrest among the people of Geneva for it is said that after his condemnation by Calvin and his execution – the Protestants later erected a memorial in Champal where he died, in honour of the brilliant Spanish scholar (who was amongst others theologian, medical scientist, also jurist, humanist, astronomer – considering the knowledge in this field at the time) whilst Calvin exclusively seems to have been a theologian although he too studied law with Servetus and he should then have been well acquainted with the Roman laws as well as those pertaining to Geneva in particular (rf Footnotes 1 and 2).

It seems traces of cruel Essene conduct against a neighbour shines through in Servetus' encounter with Calvin and perhaps (?) Servetus' type of Nazarene doctrinal leniencies have led to such a cruel death. The Catholics in Spain later too erected a life-sized statue of him in Madrid proving that he did leave his mark on history and presumably done by his own kinsmen in honour of his scientific knowledge gained rather than for his religious ideas.

However, his exceptional courage and bravery, standing to the bitter end for his religious convictions, have at last gained the respect this Christian martyr indeed deserves. Besides, Jesus is not going to condemn mankind to the fires of hell for not adhering to the Trinity! A primitive idea coming from the New Testament Gnostic apocrypha³. Servetus was right: the Trinity *per se* cannot be found in the Bible (it is systematized from the Scriptures and worded in accordance with a specific doctrinal stance – the Essenes believed in a Trinity for the *Didache* is linked to them!

Today statues and icons of him proliferate in his house of birth – its restoration as a museum (rf Footnote 1). So just to recap and if the municipal officers of Geneva indeed had the final say as is often wedged in as an excuse to prove Calvin's innocence in this nasty stunt enacted against a man who would not have killed those who disagreed with him. Servetus was without a trace of doubt by far the greater of the two personalities.

Calvin undoubtedly *also* had a say in the total drama and which he indeed could have used in order to at least alleviate the verdict against Servetus but it is obvious that this was an act of religious (doctrinal) discrimination, for he was regarded as the “Jewel” of the Anabaptists who were all but popular in Geneva - something I myself have experienced in the past, along with many Pentecostals, having had come from the Reformist camp, i.e. in one's work situation, at school, indeed everywhere. A certain theologian, Dr Geertsema, wrote a book⁴ I have referred to in one of my research works, so shameful that one can only know that God Himself had sent the political changes in 1994 (establishing a New South Africa) and therefore for a very good reason!

This just briefly said for there is nothing more despicable than religious discrimination for religious discrimination proves one's inability to accept somebody else's right to free speech and a free life! Something Calvin could definitely not grasp (deal with properly) for he clearly never learned not to abuse his clerical authority, and of course doing so to the detriment of those who disagreed theologically with him - isn't sending someone to the stake (no matter the times such one has lived in) abuse of *authority* – Christ vesting this quality in especially those bringing His Word? Fact is, Jesus never initiated persecution against one's fellows (person to person) and it was

3. James, M.R., *The Apocryphal New Testament* - newly translated - Oxford University Press, London, 1966.

4 Geertsema, P.G., *Die Wederdopers weerlê*, HAUM, 1978

on the whole the Anabaptists (themselves having been persecuted severely) who did not, in return, persecute those who differed from them.

Because I know the pain of religious discrimination and the damage it can do to people's lives, I dare to stick out my neck with this type of reaction I am adopting here, namely to boldly claim that a clean slate given to Calvin is wrong. Should we take a good look at the Essenes and their cruel dealings with those who differed from them/or who have offended them in one or other way, it seems this Essene type of intolerance had spilled over to post-apostolic Christendom for neither Jesus nor His apostles ever planted religious persecution.

Why the story of Calvin and Servetus is so important is because these two protagonists did not belong to the Mother Church (Catholicism) and which church had her own type of persecution in place especially during the Reformation. But both Calvin and Servetus were part of the reawakening of gospel truth that had fallen in place with the dawn of the Renaissance although Servetus was an Anabaptist and Calvin a Reformist.

Calvin was then the guilty one who had Servetus' arrested for Calvin *wanted* to see him arrested and executed! He was also fully aware of Servetus' miraculous escape from the clutches of the cruel Spanish Inquisition and he must then have known all too well that another arrest, especially in his own domain, would have led to Servetus' execution. Period! Calvin got hold of Servetus' MS – one of them – and that compelled him to act against Servetus

Calvin had then, as was said, decided to have Michael Servet (Spanish) arrested in Geneva should he ever pay a visit there. So he was clearly bent on getting Servetus (the Latinized form) out of the way should he see his face again in Geneva and where the staunch Reformist had cut himself a niche of sovereignty over many a sincere Protestant who themselves had to, painstakingly, put up with his outrageous Blue Laws of Geneva. One can hide facts to a certain extent, but not forever. God just has a way to vindicate the innocent and He usually does so in strange ways. Had Calvin not collaborated so closely with the Catholic Church, things would have been different for Servetus.

Many Anabaptists suffered the same fate, namely of martyrdom. Calvin's favourite, Chrosostym, had believers (the Arians) drowned just as Luther also had done the very same although it is said that Luther⁵ approved this harsh penalty against the Anabaptists, signing their death warrant “with a heavy hand” – he had the Anabaptists drowned (rf. Footnote 5).

The question then remains: Why couldn't Calvin as a *prominent* influential Reformist at the time, have tried to ward off this barbarous death Servetus had to suffer in Geneva? Fact is, he didn't lift a finger to have the “dog” and “monstrosity” horrendously barbecued! If this is not hatespeech, what is it? It was Calvin who used this type of depiction for Servetus? ⁶

It seems this selfsame hatred had just gained momentum with the arrival of Pentecostalism in South Africa (1904), a Holy Spirit movement that profusely blossomed in later decades, however, inspiring many a Reformist theologian anew to lash out against Servetus, planting the idea that the *Anabaptist* was totally guilty whilst Calvin was the innocent party. Servetus' trial should therefore be approached objectively, without bias and with a clear intention to see through the veil of prejudice and personal interest. In Judgment Day there will be none of this, only the bare facts before us and Jesus (Rev. 20.4 & 11+).

Not being a Calvinist of course meant that one would feel the brunt of rejection and

⁵ Bainton, R. *The Penguin History of Christianity*, 2 Vol, Taylor Garnett Evans & Co. Ltd., Great Britain, 1967.

⁶ See Vlammmende Haat - Calvin en Servetus (Ester Blomerus) also footnote rf 2.

discrimination just everywhere! Discrimination against the Pentecostals was definitely the order of the day in the old Apartheid era in South Africa. Having been regarded as “outcasts” and practically as second-class citizens was nothing but *persecution!* It was painful and not easy. So the name of Calvin to me spells both discrimination and persecution. There are many case histories of how the Calvinists launched their tactics against the Pentecostals, and so that Calvin today is for many still a sign of oppression.

It is said that Servetus was surprised when Calvin's police had him arrested during his church service, so he was not expecting this to have happened to him, but the crux remains that Calvin was the one who gave the fatal sign to his police for he had known Servetus well, knowing his face and features, however, this surely does not mean that Calvin was ordered by the municipal officers to have him arrested (Servetus' visit to his church that Sunday was unexpected).

Everything then points to Calvin having been the one who exercised his own authority in collaboration, as it seems, with the municipal officers of Geneva, however, not making any effort, not even in the slightest way, to help him escape from his predicament, as surely, others in those days must have been able to do with the help and assistance of friends or accomplices or somebody who just had pity on them. It is only logical to conclude that where Calvin had Servetus arrested, he was definitely not interested in Servetus' welfare, rather grabbing the *opportune* time to have him arrested and so that he would have had no opportunity to escape *again*.

Why had him arrested and on top of it creating the impression (implicitly or explicitly) that his hands were clean? Therefore, those who are still to this day trying to side with Calvin, are the very same as those having lived in the sixteenth century in Geneva.⁷ It is just amazing how Calvin can be whitewashed in stead of laying guilt at his door. Fact is, Calvin hated Servetus and his hatred was obvious to those who could see through his veil of self-importance - his autocratic Blue Laws passed in Geneva and his hate speech launched against somebody who indeed did not agree with Calvin's Trinity but who was for centuries after Servetus' death in Champal, recurrently condemned by the posterity of Calvin, implicitly of course proving that Calvin was the very one who was responsible for Servetus' cruel death for this type of behaviour fostered prejudice and persecution. Why then the big noise if not? But here treachery was obviously part and parcel of this whole ordeal!

Eugene Marais⁸, the Afrikaans author of the *Soul of the Ant* (amongst others) also wrote about Servetus (he was a journalist), clearly regarding Calvin as the culprit in this tragic drama. It seems that Calvin was one who could easily wipe out his tracks so to say and it also seems he could just as easily have worn a mask of innocence. Fact is, although Calvin had not all the say in Geneva, he had enough spark to have rejected Catholicism, propagating the Reformation boldly and openly, proving that the municipal officers of Geneva were also in collaboration with him, else he too would have gone the very same way as Servetus had, but he didn't, substantiating then the idea that Calvin was guilty of Servetus' horrendous and untimely “death”.

So to point to “the times of Calvin” just to justify Calvin's hand in Servetus' martyrdom, means zilch unless we objectify Calvin's own authoritative position in Geneva for it was authoritative enough to have had police ready-handed to arrest “culprits” like Servetus! He was executed outside Geneva in Champal and surely, Calvin could have planned a neat escape for Servetus in one or other way whilst on his way to Champal, but he didn't for there is no sign of an effort on Calvin's part made to arrange the escape of the unhappy man.

⁷ Why the exceptional high regard for Calvin as though it was a privilege for Servetus to liaise with Calvin! Something often coming through in discussions on Servetus' personality and his interactions with Calvin making Servet the rude character in the drama, yet hiding Calvin's own name calling? Besides they interacted on ideas and Servetus too had a right to voice his own, independent viewpoints surely. Calvin clearly had his own immaturities and unchristian conduct (rf footnote 2). The problem with whitewashing is that the truth always leaks in one way or another unless slander is standing behind it.

⁸ Marais, Eugene N., *Spore in die Sand en ander Verhale*, Afrikaanse Pers boekhandel, 1949.

I know how the Pentecostals (labelled “Anabaptists” or “Wederdopers” by the Reformists) were persecuted in umpteenth ways. This is the type of religious discrimination that cannot just be swept under the carpet for Britain was for religious freedom at the time. [I know of a bold pioneer evangelist⁹ who was preaching in the early thirties on the streets of Port Elizabeth (he also held meetings in halls and houses) and one evening police were sent to arrest him. He opposed the arrest, declaring: “In the name of His Majesty, I bring this message of Jesus Christ to the people of this country and let me carry on.” And he went on bringing the Gospel of Jesus freely not fearing in the least the usual attacks on the “Wederdopers”, proving that God always makes a way for those who lean on Him regardless the onslaught. If the message had not been brought by bold heroes of Jesus, renewal on the spiritual front would never have come!”]

Fact is laws were also passed against the “Wederdopers” later on and with the intent to exert control over their activities - prized church sites were selectively allocated when a new township was planned and belonging to a sect often barred a child from successfully applying for a bursary – something that was easily available for D.R members for tertiary study purposes and as many Reformists' children could then easily have acquired whereas those coming from the “sects” couldn't.

In the eighties there was so much discrimination unleashed against the Pentecostals and the Charismatics that many still feel the brunt thereof for climbing the promotion ladder, or getting a good career opportunity, especially in some State departments, depended heavily on one's religious membership. There were those who had to even quit their jobs and just for the sake of peace of mind, yet who were never guilty of misconduct in whichever way. Learners often had to tolerate nasty remarks passed by teachers – even small children - and just because of their church memberships not having been “Dutch Reformed”.

False accusations against the “sects” were the order of the day and a very intelligent child was often marginalized by teachers who were bent on picking on an innocent child who had come from the wrong side of the track! But there were also good and kind teachers who were not swept along this type of discriminatory current and the Wederdoper children, on the whole, quickly learned to stand their ground too – depending of course on whether one was lucky enough to get past the nasty remarks and biting sarcasm coming not from the learners but from teachers who were salaried by the State.

This type of unhealthy discrimination was on the whole much heavier in the civil service and in the more prestigious State departments, also in schools yet it was totally different from the ordinary rejection “for the sake of Christ” - and which any Christian can naturally expect to come against anywhere. The Charismatics and the Pentecostals were, however, on the whole labelled as “unstable”, as “emotional” and “unable to lead”, even merit bonuses were often withheld due to this type of job discrimination.

I can just imagine what Servetus must have suffered, standing against the all-powerful Catholic stream, yet simultaneously having had to cope with the rigorous rejection of Protestantism and especially fuelled by Calvin's passion to have him removed from society - was he jealous of Servetus' achievements? This is a question only Calvin will be able to answer in the day of all days!

Calvin was therefore the typical prototype of this type of persecution against anybody who was not prepared to side with mainline Reformed viewpoints. It seems he could not tolerate

⁹ My father who was a pioneer evangelist in the thirties/forties and who had come from the most staunch of the three SA Reformed Churches (the “Doppers”). Jesus baptized him in 1926 with the Holy Spirit, mightily using him in His labourfield with especially the Gifts of Holy Spirit.

difference of opinion for although he reasoned with Servetus, implicitly giving him an opportunity to accept his own viewpoints on Godhead of course, for this is why he was prepared to bargain with Servetus on faith issues, he was clearly not happy with Servetus' "obstinacy" to hold his own ground. It was then Calvin's ideas versus those of Servetus and Calvin's naturally prevailed for, after presumably many discussions with Servetus, and not in the least prepared to, in the spirit of Christ, agree to disagree, he directly or indirectly sealed Servetus' fate with the death penalty.

Now some would quickly react, saying that in "those days" denying the Trinity meant martyrdom, however, why did Calvin then begin his own movement (or joining Luther and the other Reformists in breaking away from mainstream Catholicism), not wanting Servetus to do the same though for the time was then ripe for enlightenment and a totally moving away from the prescriptive mother church's dogma? Although I myself do not totally support Servetus' Christological perspective (Unitarian), I do think that Servetus had a right to declare Christ in a different way for the Trinity too has strong loopholes and therefore it is said that Luther was more lenient with Godhead declarations than Calvin¹⁰ Calvin was clearly an authoritarian, rigid personality.

Sending Servetus to the stake – and to die by slow fire (!) - is proof of Calvin's intense hatred of Servetus he subtly nurtured in his heart. Not even in his death he tried to lessen the condemned man's suffering! And this is where anybody having the spirit of Christ – which was also preached in those days - would agree, namely that this whole drama speaks of plotting and treachery and Calvin will have to give account of his share in Servetus' horrendous death in Judgment day!

According to Bainton Calvin signed the death warrant on behalf of the Protestants and the Catholic Church of course on their own behalf. Why was he not prepared to oppose the verdict against Servetus, endangering his own life instead? But he clearly did not want to - he obviously thought he had done God a big favour by helping (!) to get rid of Servetus co-operating with the municipal officers (ref Footnote 1 – on Genevan legal matters in those days and Servetus' request for an attorney/advocate to handle this particular lawsuit and which request was (seemingly irregularly) blatantly denied).

Therefore, looking at this matter once again from all sides, Calvin was indeed the one who could have warded off this tragedy had he been bent on doing so. Besides, he was the religious man who had all the religious answers and mercy was always part of God's Word Calvin was regularly bringing to the inhabitants of the city where he exercised his own authority in extremely rigid ways and just as he was also doing with Servetus who was quietly sitting in the pews listening to him. Surely, we are not called to iconize our leaders for they are all human beings who can falter and fail.

Which of the two I would choose today conversing with? I would rather go for Servetus for he at least stuck to sound civilized principles, exchanging differences of opinion in a friendly, open-hearted way, perhaps having come across strongly (even perhaps a little too strong at times), but, nevertheless, allowing his opponent to also differ from him. Therefore he attended Calvin's meeting full knowing his theology on Godhead, also other doctrinal ideas. Beza, for a good reason, then referred to Servetus as "the unlucky guy" (rf Footnote 1).

Servetus was clearly someone believing in freedom of speech and of mind. I therefore will not go for someone like Calvin who was undoubtedly full of anger and resentment and aimed at a scholar who had made a far greater impact with his type of scientific research and writings than many can imagine for Servetus' death indirectly opened the way to a broader outlook on traditional ideas although he is still, to this day, to a large extent the "underdog" for many a staunch Calvinist!

¹⁰ I myself believe in the definite pre-existence of Christ who put on flesh to tabernacle among man.

Therefore, freedom of speech and freedom of religion are indeed necessary for it is the very foundation of what we call “civilization”!

A sharp mind will quickly detect even discrimination against Servetus' findings on the circulatory system, as if his share in this scientific breakthrough can also be diminished and all because of his particular Godhead declaration. And not only diminished but completely denied! This is how far partiality for Calvin, to this very day, is stretched!

May God raise up more Michael Servets who are prepared to voice their opinions (also for righteousness and justice) even against the broader majority, never acting detrimental to somebody else's person or welfare!

In conclusion : This whole debacle was clearly a matter of dispute on the *Trinity* (Calvin) versus Servetus' Anabaptist Godhead theology. Both Calvin and Servetus were theologians in their own right but Servetus brought a more friendly, merciful Jesus than Calvin ever did. Humanism in itself is not bad or wrong. It is what we do with the freedom God gives us, that counts. And freedom of thought, based and done on the Word of God – in accordance with it - can only be beneficial for mankind as, since Erasmus' times, a new hope in a loving, caring Jesus *also* broke through the veil of restrictive, organized Christendom.

Knowledge also has since been proliferating, just as God said to Daniel it would happen, but as long as we, once again, grow in the true knowledge of God, serving the living God in spirit and in truth, bearing the fruits of the Spirit and loving our neighbour as we love ourselves, just as Christ gave us the Torah command anew, stressing our essential faith in God (Jn 4.24; Mr 12; Gal.5). However, discarding discrimination does not mean that we cannot freely discuss our religious differences, also boldly comparing what we believe with Scripture!

Religious (doctrinal) discrimination (persecution is the result of this type of discrimination), like ethnic discrimination, robs people of their rightful potential, closing doors for them indeed, yet, in the long run, the perpetrators thereof paying the price of guilt and shame for illumination is always sent by a living God and naturally with the purpose of proving that God is kind and merciful and that He is *always* in control. He knows very well what had happened to the early Church's Spirit-breathed doctrines and how the true deposit of our faith was delivered by the post-apostolic teachers!

We can only rectify a wrong deed done if we can FEEL the pain inflicted!

Love your neighbour AS YOURSELF (Jesus, quoting from Torah).

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Revised final version : 2019-05-04