

THE DRAMA OF CONSCIENCE

A Three-Dimensional Analysis On Calvin's Responsibility For Servetus Affair

Ricky F. Njoto

Abstract: The Servetus affair which happened in 1553 remains the biggest drop of black ink on John Calvin's white record as a reformer. This essay evaluates the degree to which Calvin can be considered as responsible in the affair from three different perspectives: (1) his ecclesiastical responsibilities as a church leader and a reformer, (2) his political responsibilities as the leader of the Genevan church, main player in the Consistory, and a responsible civilian in the sixteenth century Europe, and (3) his moral responsibilities. In the end, this essay will conclude that Calvin is responsible only because he played a role in every dimension stated above. However, there are other circumstances, individuals, and groups that need to be taken in to account as well. This means that Calvin cannot be held entirely responsible.

Keywords: Calvin, Servetus, Reformation, History, Sixteenth Century

Abstrak: Kasus Servetus yang terjadi di tahun 1553 masih merupakan titik hitam di atas lembar putih kehidupan Yohanes Calvin sebagai seorang bapa reformasi. Esai ini mengevaluasi seberapa jauh Calvin dapat dianggap bertanggung jawab atas kejadian tersebut melalui tiga perseptif: (1) tanggung jawab beliau sebagai seorang pemimpin gereja dan bapa reformasi, (2) tanggung jawab beliau sebagai pemimpin gereja di Geneva, pemain utama di Consistory, dan sebagai warga sipil di Eropa, dan (3) tanggung jawab beliau secara moral. Pada akhirnya, esai ini akan menyimpulkan bahwa Calvin hanya dapat dikatakan bertanggung jawab karena beliau memiliki peran di setiap dimensi

di atas. Namun, terdapat beberapa keadaan, individu, dan kelompok yang juga harus diperhitungkan sehingga Calvin tidak dapat disalahkan secara total.

Kata Kunci: Calvin, Servetus, Reformasi, Sejarah, Abad Enam Belas

INTRODUCTION: WHO IS SERVETUS?

Five hundred years after the nailing of the ninety-five theses, the events in the sixteenth century Europe are still highly discussed and debated today. The Servetus affair (1553) is probably among the most controversial. “Servetus... is the focus of events that weigh heavily on the reputation of (Calvin) even in the eyes of Reformed people today.”¹ In 1903, the city of Geneva erected a monument with the inscription that proclaims Calvin’s “errors” in thinking that “freedom of conscience” is incompatible with “true foundations of reform and the gospel.” But who is Servetus?

Michael Servetus was born around 1510 in Villeneuve de Sijena in northern Spain. Since he was young, Servetus had always had unorthodox theological views. By 1531, only when he was around 21, he published a theological book called *De Trinitatis Erroribus* from Strasbourg, which contained a refutation to the doctrine of the Trinity using dozens of scriptural references and quotations of the early church fathers. After an expected storm of criticisms and a request by the local authorities for him to publish a recantation, Servetus published a second book called *Dialogorum de Trinitate* in 1532, in which he “recanted” only because his first work was incomplete; he did not recant from his anti-Trinitarian beliefs. After having to leave Strasbourg for heresy, Servetus was

¹ Alexandre Ganoczy, “Calvin’s Life,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17.

arrested in Lyons in 1538 for another charge of heresy, from which he managed to escape after he made a sufficient defence against the charge.

After moving to Vienne, Servetus initiated a contact with John Calvin in 1545, asking theological questions. Unsatisfied with Calvin's answers, Servetus started insulting Calvin. The letters exchange quickly became full of mutual hostility of name callings. Calvin sent a copy of the *Institutes* to Servetus, which Servetus returned with scribbles of critical comments, along with his early incomplete copy of another anti-trinitarian work which he was preparing to publish. During this time, Calvin wrote to a friend expressing his desire that Servetus should die.

In 1553, the manuscript which Servetus had sent to Calvin, having been expanded and improved, was published with the title *Christianismi Restitutio*. Servetus also chose to include his letters to Calvin as an appendix. His authorship of the book was concealed, but not for long. When the book was published in Geneva, Calvin had to respond. With some smart maneuver, Calvin wrote to the authorities of the French Catholic Church, reporting Servetus. Servetus was eventually captured by the Inquisition, once again charged for heresy, and jailed. After a couple of days in prison, Servetus escaped by scaling the wall of the prison garden. The Catholic Church burnt Servetus' books in his absence.

Servetus was bound to Italy when, for some unknown reasons, he decided to stop by Geneva and attended the church where Calvin preached on Sunday, 13th of August 1553. Being a fugitive, Servetus was quickly recognized, reported, and thrown to prison. After a few non-conclusive trials and multiple debates between Servetus and Calvin, the Genevan Council received a report that the other Swiss Reformation cities supported an extreme

punishment for Servetus, and thus the Council announced the verdict that Servetus was to be burned at the stake. On the 27th of October 1553, Servetus was burned alive with his books in Geneva. His last words were, “Jesus, *Son of the eternal God*, have mercy on me”; showing that he probably still denied that Jesus was *the eternal Son of God* (because of his denial of the Trinity) to his death. Calvin did not attend to watch.

The negative image that the Servetus affair brought towards Calvin can be reflected in Radovan Lovčič’s book that clearly portrays Calvin as a cruel dictator and Servetus as a holy martyr,² or in Benjamin Hodges’ statement about Calvin: “(Calvin) had before glutted his cruel mind with (Servetus’) blood. If Calvin died in this temper, it can’t be said that he died a Christian... Calvin copied after Saul the persecutor, and not after St. Paul, the apostle of the beneficent Jesus.”³

To what degree is Calvin responsible for the Servetus affair? In order to answer this question, a balanced analysis of the events against the background of the sixteenth century must be conducted. This essay, therefore, shall attempt to evaluate the affair from three different perspectives: ecclesiastical, political, and moral. Despite the apparent difficulties to separate the three dimensions in the sixteenth century, to what degree Calvin is responsible in each of the sphere (and overall) can be concluded in the end.

² Radovan Lovčič, *Michael Servetus: Heretic or Saint?* (Dunedin: Prague House, 2008).

³ Benjamin Hodges, *An Impartial History of Michael Servetus: Burnt Alive at Geneva for Heresy* (London: King’s Arms, 1724), 20-22.

IN THE NAME OF THE HOLY TRINITY!: CALVIN'S ECCLESIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The battle between Calvin and Servetus, in its most fundamental level, was ecclesial. Calvin accused Servetus of heresy and blasphemy, and Servetus accused Calvin of following the doctrine of the church fathers instead of the Bible. Therefore, before going into the more controversial discussions on Calvin's political and moral responsibilities, one should acknowledge that Calvin had ecclesial responsibilities that he needed to carry during the affair.

First, Calvin is responsible in rebuking Servetus theologically. It is crucial to understand that Servetus thought that he was doing a re-reformation. He calls his book *Christianismi Restitutio* (Restoration of Christianity), which is an apparent call for war against Calvin's *Institutio Christianae*. Servetus sees himself as an end-time figure, perhaps as the representative of the archangel Michael himself, who brought about a mission to restore the true Christianity which had been tainted by both the Catholic and the Reformation churches. Servetus sees it as his messianic duty to re-reform the church according to the "truth" that had been "revealed" to him.⁴

The problem is that it is apparent that Servetus' theology in the *Restitutio* was essentially anti-trinitarian. For Servetus, there is but one God, who reveals himself in three different temporal modes. Therefore, although the *Logos* is God, he becomes human when he reveals himself in Christ, the Son. Since Christ is human, he can only be considered divine because he has the Spirit of God. It follows that, because the same Spirit of God exists in all, every

⁴ Maria Tausiet, "Magus versus Falsarius: A Duel of Insults between Calvin and Servetus," *RRR* 10.1 (2008): 75.

person is both human and divine. It seems that Servetus combined Sabellianism, Arianism, and even an extreme version of *Theosis*, as he writes, “Truly we are said to be participants of the divine nature (not, as the Eastern Orthodox *theosis* states, “divine energies”)... Our inward man is God as Christ is God and the Holy Spirit is God.”⁵ Not only that, Servetus calls the Trinity “a three-headed monster” due to his Unitarian theology. For this reason, Calvin comments regarding Servetus, “There is no form of impiety that this monster has not raked up.” For Calvin, Servetus erases the distinction between God and human as to, not only absurdly deify human, but also identify God with corruptible creation, as he comments that Servetus makes something “common to both Christ and the stones.”⁶

Calvin did not only regard Servetus as a heretic, but also a blasphemer, who denied and defied God. In Calvin’s vision of God as the infinite and the most powerful, there is no offense that is more serious than when a puny human blasphemes God.⁷ However, this was by no means Calvin’s own view. In the sixteenth century Christendom, barely anyone would disagree that blasphemy was to be severely punished.⁸ Even Luther, who thought that capital punishments could be reconsidered for heretics, agreed with the idea of capital punishments for blasphemers.⁹ For Calvin, since blasphemy is an attack to God, any responsibility of the church or of the state to carry punishments to blasphemers comes from God

⁵ *Christianismi Restitutio*, 557-559.

⁶ Roland H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus, 1511-1553* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1953), 139.

⁷ Tausiet, “Magus versus Falsarius,” 67.

⁸ Mirjam G. K. van Veem, “Calvin and His Opponents,” in *The Calvin Handbook*, trans. Gerrit W. Sheeres, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 161.

⁹ Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 170.

himself.¹⁰ Waging war against the concept of Trinity meant waging war against the whole church, both Catholic and Protestant.

Therefore, Calvin was responsible in battling Servetus theologically, but this responsibility was assumed by any good Christian leader, Protestant or otherwise. The Christian God himself was under the attack of blasphemy. Thus, in the end, when Servetus had been sentenced to death, Calvin wrote,

“I reminded him gently how I had risked my life more than sixteen years ago to gain him for our Savior. If he would return to reason I would faithfully do my best to reconcile him to all good servants of God... I told him that I would pass over everything which concerned personally. He should rather ask the pardon of God whom he has so basely blasphemed... But when I saw that all this did no good, I... withdrew from the heretic who was self-condemned.”¹¹

Here one can see Calvin’s ecclesial responsibility to return Servetus to the truth. Although he admitted that the issue had hit him personally to some extent, he was willing to let it go for the sake of returning Servetus to the truth and to the church.

Second, Calvin is responsible to keep the Reformation movement in orthodoxy. As Protestants fled from Spain and Italy, heretics fled along with them and looked for refuge in Swiss cities.¹² For this reason, the Reformation movement in Swiss cities had been struggling against accusations of protecting, and even of being identified with, heretics. Calvin had a first-hand taste of this in 1536 when a minister named Pierre Caroli, supposedly a

¹⁰ Tausiet, “Magus versus Falsarius,” 68.

¹¹ *Calvini Opera*, VIII, 737-741. Response 37. As quoted in Lawrence Goldstone & Nancy Goldstone, *Out of the Flames: Remarkable Story of a Fearless Scholar, a Fatal Heresy, and One of the Rarest Books in the World* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 196.

¹² Tausiet, “Magus versus Falsarius,” 60.

Protestant himself but perhaps too Catholic in theology, accused Calvin of heresy of Arianism. It almost derailed the Reformation in Geneva, and it forced Calvin to attempt to re-establish his orthodox image, and consequently, the image of the Genevan Reformation.¹³ Because of this, after Servetus published the *Restitutio*, which contained Arian teaching, and spread it in Geneva, Calvin took actions not only to get rid of this heretic for the sake of the church, but also for the sake of his, and the Genevan Reformation, image.¹⁴ The action, at the time, was by reporting Servetus to the Inquisition because he was not within the jurisdiction of Geneva.

As Gordon rightly notes, during the days where the Reformation church suffered accusations of giving freedom to heretics, it was entirely crucial for the early Reformers to keep heresy out of the society. Failure to do this would have resulted in a catastrophic result that would forever associate the Reformation movement with tolerance for heresies and blasphemies.¹⁵ The other Protestant cities realized this and therefore supported Geneva. In this manner, Servetus affair reflects the situations of the Protestant world which was still attempting to define itself in relation to the Roman Catholic church.¹⁶ Therefore, Calvin's attitude towards Servetus was to be seen, partly, as a follow-up on his responsibility as a leader of the Reformation.

Third, however, the Catholic church also indirectly contributed in the final verdict for Servetus. Although Calvin was involved in supplying the evidence for the Inquisition, it was they

¹³ Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 217.

¹⁴ Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 221.

¹⁵ Gordon, *Calvin*, 224.

¹⁶ Matthew J. Pereira, "In the Name of the Three Headed Monster: The Contours of the Judicial Process in Servetus' Trial," *USQR* 60.3-4 (2007): 31-33. It is important to note that, although the Protestant cities did execute heretics, these executions numbered far less compared to the Catholic world "even in that barbarous age."

who captured Servetus in April 1553, four months prior to his capture in Geneva. Questions have been raised whether Calvin's "partnership" with the Inquisition was morally correct. This issue will be addressed later. For now, it should suffice to say that the Catholic church played a major role in the final verdict. In June 1553, after Servetus' escape, the Catholic church convicted him of heresy and sentenced him to be burnt. This crime acts as one of the major charges that the Genevan Council gave Servetus, which finally led to a death sentence. Ecclesiastically, Calvin should not be held solely responsible. As Servetus offended the whole Christian church, virtually all in the church condemned him. Although Calvin played a major role due to his direct theological conversations with Servetus and him directly prosecuting Servetus, he was merely a person who was a part of the whole Christian church that agreed with him.

Nonetheless, the above arguments could also be used to justify the Catholic church's decision to burn Protestants as heretics. Therefore, does the Servetus affair show that Calvin was no better than the tyrannical Pope? The discussion on Calvin's political responsibilities below will provide an answer to this, because, unlike the case with the Pope, Calvin's ecclesial responsibilities were far from enough to give him the power to be entirely responsible for Servetus affair. Although it is true that there was a "fusion of the religious and secular spheres,"¹⁷ and therefore, what happened in the church could be closely related to what happened in the secular government, I suspect that this "fusion" was not as "full" as one might perceive, especially in relation to the Servetus affair in Geneva. Therefore, a political dimension of the case must also be presented.

¹⁷ Tausiet, 'Magus versus Falsarius', 67.

IN THE NAME OF ORDER! CALVIN'S POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

It is first and foremost necessary to develop an understanding on the extent of Calvin's authority in Geneva. In a letter to Ferel, a colleague, Calvin writes during his letters exchange with Servetus, "Servetus has just sent me, together with his letters, a long volume of his ravings. If I consent he will come here, but I will not give my word, for should he come, if my authority is of no avail I will not suffer him to get out alive."¹⁸ Calvin's desire for personal vendetta might be sensed here, which has been used across the ages to show Calvin's lack of good morality. More on this will be exposed in the next section. Nonetheless, perhaps one can also see that Calvin is aware of his authority, not only in the church, but also in Geneva. He had a legal responsibility as a leader of the Genevan Reformation, and he planned to follow on this responsibility if Servetus was ever seen in Geneva. To what extent did Calvin have an authority in Geneva, however? There are several factors to consider in assessing Calvin's political responsibility for Servetus affair.

First, Calvin's action towards Servetus was according to the law. Although Calvin was the one who reported and prosecuted Servetus,¹⁹ this action was according to the *Codex Justinianus*, which condemned anyone who denied the Trinity to death penalty.²⁰ In a world where religion acted as the cornerstone of civilization, an enemy of religion was seen as a threat to social order itself. By arguing against the belief of the whole society (and against their God), Servetus declared himself an enemy of religion, and thus a threat to the civilized society.²¹ Moreover, Servetus

¹⁸ Cal. Op., XII, 283, Feb. 13, 1546.

¹⁹ Goldstone & Goldstone, *Out of the Flames*, 178.

²⁰ Van Veem, "Calvin and His Opponents," 163.

²¹ Goldstone & Goldstone, *Out of the Flames*, 185.

argued against Paedobaptism by saying that those under twenty could not commit moral sin. This thesis was considered a promotion of anarchy as seen from the charges brought against Servetus in Geneva.²² There was fear that this doctrine would have encouraged teenagers to commit criminal acts. In the world where religion overlapped with social structure, this was a sensible concern. In debating against the humanists from Basel after Servetus' death, Calvin argued that the government had a duty to exterminate heresy because it undermined civilized society and threatened the entire social order.²³ Servetus was against the law and Calvin merely fought for order.

Second, therefore, when the Genevan Council asked the councils of Zurich, Berne, Basel, and Schaffhausen, they received seemingly unanimous replies that favoured extreme measures. Haller, a minister at Berne, even wrote, "On hearing this, (the magistrates of those cities) were all so indignant that I doubt not they would have burned (Servetus) had he been detained in their prisons."²⁴ This shows a web of different sides sharing the same responsibility. For this reason, some arguments have been raised blaming not only Calvin, but also the Protestant cities in general and Geneva in particular for not "knowing better" than the Catholic church. However, this accusation is unfair. Selderhuis is correct in saying that, if Geneva had sparred Servetus, they would have been abandoned by other Catholic and Protestant cities as a threat to the society itself.²⁵ Consequently, although the Genevan Council was against Calvin, they could not have sparred Servetus. Moreover, Calvin and Geneva's decision to seek councils from the neighboring Protestant cities showed a serious development in their

²² Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 190.

²³ Van Veem, "Calvin and His Opponents," 162.

²⁴ *Cal. Op.*, XIV, 627.

²⁵ Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life*, trans. Albert Gootjes (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 205-206.

political world that made these Reformers distinct from the Catholics who were under the tyrannical power of the Pope. Therefore, to regard Calvin as the Genevan pope, which some people still do, is an unfair assessment of the situation.

Third, despite Calvin's responsibility to fight for order and for God's honor, I wonder if he had a sufficient authority in Geneva to be held fully responsible for Servetus' death. It shall be noted that, by the time of the affair, Calvin, who dominated the Consistory, also had less power in Geneva compared to his earlier years there. In 1541, the Consistory was established on Calvin's request as a condition upon his return to Geneva.²⁶ The Consistory is a body of court consisting of lay representatives (which were mostly strong politicians) and ministers. Although it was mostly a court for ecclesiastical issues, because the division between secular and sacred worlds was unclear, the Consistory was able, among other things, to banish anyone from the church, and thus from the city; and to send opponents of the church to the Small Council, which could result in death penalties.²⁷ However, one should note that only in 1555 did the right of the Consistory to excommunicate become officially recognized. When Servetus was burnt at the stake in 1553, the Council still insisted that the Consistory only had the right to "recommend" a punishment, not to carry it.²⁸

In addition to the Consistory's lack of power in making decisions in legal matters, the Zwinglian model that gives power to the magistrates of the city remained throughout Protestant Switzerland.²⁹ Most of the magistrates in the Genevan Little Council during the time were anti-Calvin, and the adherents of the

²⁶ Gordon, *Calvin*, 133.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁸ William G. Naphy, "Calvin's Geneva," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2004), 31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

reformer were excluded by the Council of the Two Hundred and General Council.³⁰ There were even possibilities, with the changes in the government, that Calvin could have been kicked out of Geneva again.³¹ Therefore, when the magistrates did not want Calvin to have the final say regarding Servetus' final fate, as Calvin writes, "So much so, that were I to allege that it is clear at mid-day, (the Council) would immediately begin to doubt it",³² they succeeded to shut Calvin off. Calvin wrote to Farel, "I hope that sentence of death will at least be passed upon him, but I desire that the severity of the punishment may be mitigated."³³ Calvin did not wish a severe punishment for Servetus, and therefore, when the Council decided that Servetus shall be burnt, he wanted to change the mode of execution to a more humane method. His limited involvement in the final say, however, could not ensure him of this. The Council did not desire to affirm the Catholics' accusation that "Geneva was a haven for all heresies," but contrary to Calvin, feeling that lighter penalties would not suffice, they burnt the heretic.³⁴ Seen this way, Calvin could not be held responsible for Servetus' death by the fire.

Fourth, I wonder why Calvin is to be blamed but Servetus is not. Even without Calvin's contributions, Servetus had managed to be accused of heresy multiple times in different cities. Thus, when he published the *Restitutio*, which was against the entire body of Christianity back then, there was no possible circumstance where he could have gotten away anywhere in Europe without being a threat to civil order. Moreover, a question arises when one considers why Servetus went to Geneva on the way to Naples, Italy, after escaping the Inquisition in Vienne. This is an odd

³⁰ See Rilliet, *Calvin and Servetus*, 79-80.

³¹ Goldstone & Goldstone, *Out of the Flames*, 162.

³² As quoted in Gordon, *Calvin*, 220.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Naphy, "Calvin's Geneva," 32-33.

decision.³⁵ Perhaps an analysis of this question might shed light to who was responsible for Servetus' death. There has been a theory that Servetus went to Geneva because he wanted to make use of the political situation there to his advantage. Some even argue that Servetus desired to help the Libertines on a *coup de ta* to overthrow Calvin, but I think this is a far stretch.³⁶

There are, indeed, several indications that might indicate Servetus' collision with the Libertines during the trial, but these indications are superficial. After the Libertines were defeated, the Genevan Council wrote that the Libertines had given "protection and favour to Servetus."³⁷ Although this might have been the Council's attempt to discredit the Libertines after their defeat, this accusation makes sense and cannot be entirely rejected, given the Libertines' strong opposition to Calvin, whom they knew was against Servetus. This accusation is supported by the fact that the Libertines were active in the trial to defend Servetus, and also, as Farel said, "There were some who gave (Servetus) to hope that there was no danger."³⁸ There are also questions regarding why Servetus' attitude during the trials towards questions about Guillaume Gueroult is odd and sometimes inconsistent, full of concealment and evasion.³⁹ Gueroult was known to have a close relationship with the Libertines, and Servetus might have been trying to conceal his collision with the Libertines in this way. However, this claim might rightly be questioned because Servetus' relationship with Gueroult was one between an author and a

³⁵ Seen on the map, the route from Vienne to Naples appears far more straightforward than Vienne-Geneva-Naples. Some scholars point out that the route through Switzerland would be safer than one through the Catholic cities. However, Servetus knew very well that Calvin was the one who had reported him to the Inquisition, so the route taken through Geneva was not nearly that safe.

³⁶ This argument is presented, for example, by Rilliet, *Calvin and Servetus*, 84. See the analysis of this argument in Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 173-179.

³⁷ *Cal. Op.*, XX, 438.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, XIV, 693.

³⁹ Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 174.

publisher, and Servetus' evasion might have been because he was trying to secure the acquittal for Gueroult.

Therefore, perhaps these superficial indications only show that the Libertines might have supported Servetus during his trial against Calvin. This makes sense considering the Libertines' antagonistic relationship with Calvin. However, one cannot say that the Libertines caused Servetus to come to Geneva, and therefore were responsible.⁴⁰ So why did Servetus come to Geneva?

It is very probable that Servetus came to Geneva with the desire to use the messy political situation to approach the man whom he accused as "turning the Reformation into the new Rome",⁴¹ to reveal himself as the end-time archangel Michael, and, as Musculus, a minister of Berne, wrote, "to carry on the affair with other churches."⁴² He wanted to bring the re-reformation war to an influential Reformation figure. As Gordon argues, Servetus might also have wished to die a martyr after giving a full account on his belief.⁴³ To whatever extent this is true, I think one can see that Servetus must be held accountable for his own actions. One suggestion by T. H. L. Parker, a prominent Calvin scholar, even goes as far as to say, "It is hard to believe that (Servetus) was completely sane."⁴⁴

Therefore, it is difficult to see why Calvin has to be held totally, or even majorly, accountable politically for the affair. First, as I have mentioned, barely anyone in those days, except the Anabaptists and a few other people, would disagree with death

⁴⁰ As argued by Albert Rilliet, *Calvin and Servetus: The Reformer's Share in the Trial of Michael Servetus, Historically Ascertained*, trans. W. K. Tweedie (London: John Johnstone, 1846), 84.

⁴¹ Gordon, *Calvin*, 219.

⁴² *Cal. Op.*, XIV, 628.

⁴³ Gordon, *Calvin*, 219.

⁴⁴ T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin* (Tring: Lion Publishing, 1975), 139.

punishments for heretics or blasphemers. As Bainton says, “Calvin was simply repeating the familiar arguments and explanations employed (for death punishments) by the Catholics and the early Protestants.”⁴⁵ Second, Calvin barely had any influence on the Council’s final decision to burn Servetus. Despite his prominent influence in the Consistory, Calvin was still a French immigrant. In the sixteenth century world, French immigrants in Swiss city-states were antagonized for cultural, political, and religious reasons. Third, if the law had been set, and Servetus knew it,⁴⁶ one must question whether it was Calvin’s responsibility that Servetus was punished when he turned up in Geneva. Despite the ever-debated question of why Servetus had to go through Geneva to go to Italy, one must admit that Servetus’ decision to go to Geneva is odd, and that he has to be held accountable for the result.

IN THE NAME OF CONSCIENCE?: CALVIN’S MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

In relation to the Servetus affair, many have accused Calvin of lacking morality. Although I have shown that Calvin’s actions were mainly motivated by his responsibilities to God, the church, and the order of society, the analysis is incomplete without an evaluation of Calvin’s morality.

First, there have been accusations that Calvin wanted Servetus to die because of the humiliation that he received from the latter. It must be known that, during the letters exchange, Calvin started off by addressing Servetus well (at least as seen in his letters), and he wanted to make Servetus repent. Nonetheless, shortly later, Calvin wrote to Frelon, a mutual friend of Calvin and Servetus, “If he goes on writing to me in the style he has hitherto

⁴⁵ Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 170.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.

seen fit to use, however,... I shall make it a matter of conscience to devote myself to (my other business), not doubting that he is a Satan who would divert me from studies more profitable.”⁴⁷ An exchange of insults arose shortly after which finally led to Servetus sending Calvin’s *Institutes* back with some scribbled notes on the margins. Calvin wrote, “There is not a page of this book that is not befouled with vomit.”⁴⁸ Bainton writes that during the first letters between the two, “Calvin replied courteously and at length but not to the satisfaction of Servetus, who told Calvin that he cut his throat with his own sword and urged him to read carefully the fourth book...”⁴⁹

Therefore, a common modern accusation is that Calvin wanted Servetus dead because Servetus offended him personally and insulting his theological ideas, as Hodges harshly comments, “Alas! Servetus had irritated that great man too much; and pope Calvin was resolved to have his blood, even though he was conscious to himself, that he had treated Servetus as rudely as Servetus had done him; nay, that he had given the first provocation that way.”⁵⁰ However, upon deeper investigations, it is obvious that Calvin did not act against Servetus on the basis of personal vendetta.

The pre-modern world used insults not as instruments of personal vengeance, but of divine wrath, and even as a tool to condemn and label evil as evil or to cast out evil altogether.⁵¹ If insults were so prevalent in pre-modern theological scholarship, the suggestion that Calvin wanted Servetus to die because of the insults might merely be a modern invention. It is true that Calvin only

⁴⁷ *Cal. Op.*, VIII, 833-834.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, VIII, 748:37.

⁴⁹ Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 144.

⁵⁰ Hodges, *An Impartial History of Michael Servetus*, 88.

⁵¹ Tausiet, “Magus versus Falsarius,” 63-64.

mentioned an explicit desire to send Servetus to death *after* the series of insults, especially after the humiliation on the *Institutes*, as Bolsec wrote, “Since which time Calvin, greatly incensed, conceived a moral antipathy to (Servetus), and meditated with himself to have him put to death.”⁵² This might also be supported by the fact that, during Servetus’ trial, Calvin used his annotated *Institutes* as the last evidence against Servetus.⁵³ It thus seems that Calvin’s mission to punish Servetus was ignited by the humiliation done by Servetus. However, Bolsec could have been biased because he generally regarded Calvin as an enemy. Calvin only stated that he could not guarantee Servetus’ safety if he were to come to Geneva, but he did not actively seek death for Servetus nor acted on his desire before Servetus published the *Restitutio*. This indicates that perhaps his responsibilities as a reformer and a church leader played a more major influence than his personal vendetta. Moreover, after Servetus was sentenced to death, Calvin still gave Servetus chances for pardon and explicitly stated that he would forgo the personal humiliation if Servetus was to renounce his beliefs publicly.⁵⁴

Second, however, regardless of his motivations, Calvin’s action of reporting Servetus to the Inquisition was, and is still, considered a moral failure. There are indications that collaborating with the Catholic church was seen as morally evil in the sixteenth century Protestant world. This is apparent in the six questions that Servetus demanded to be asked of Calvin,⁵⁵ and in Calvin’s attempt to evade the accusation of collaborating with the Inquisition by saying, “They say that I did nothing else than throw Servetus to the professed enemies of Christ as to ravening beasts... But how

⁵² Quoted in Goldstone & Goldstone, *Out of the Flames*, 155.

⁵³ Goldstone & Goldstone, *Out of the Flames*, 184.

⁵⁴ Calvin’s notes during Servetus’ last living days in Goldstone & Goldstone, *Out of the Flames*, 196.

⁵⁵ Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 199-200.

should I come to have such sudden familiarity with the satellites of the pope? To be on such good terms? It would be highly incredible indeed that letters should pass back and forth between those who have no less difference than Christ and Belial.”⁵⁶

However, letters *were* sent back and forth between Calvin and the Inquisition, albeit not directly. Calvin told his friend Trie to send the letters to provide evidence against Servetus, to Trie’s Catholic cousin in France, who later reported Servetus to the Inquisition. After several failed attempts to provide evidence, Trie wrote to his cousin, “I can give you something better to convict him, namely two dozen manuscript pieces of the man in question, in which his heresies are in part contained..., but I can tell you I had no little trouble to get from Calvin what I am sending.”⁵⁷ Calvin certainly made it so that he was not seen to be directly involved. There exists a question whether Calvin really orchestrated all this or whether Trie acted according to his own will. It is nonetheless difficult to see how Trie could come to the knowledge of Servetus’ manuscripts and letters without Calvin’s orchestration, considering that Servetus only sent these letters privately to Calvin. It is difficult, therefore, to see that Calvin did not orchestrate all this.⁵⁸ Because of Calvin’s report to the Inquisition, Calvin has been called a betrayer who betrayed Servetus “into the hands of the professed enemies to both,” and this is seen as being “against the rules of friendship, that it is destructive of common humanity.”⁵⁹

This was a dodgy move, and Calvin’s attempt to evade the accusation shows that it was. But what should he have done? One

⁵⁶ *Cal. Op.*, VIII, 479.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, VIII, 840-844.

⁵⁸ Scholars seem to agree that Calvin did orchestrate this. See Goldstone & Goldston, *Out of the Flames*, 163. Also Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 157.

⁵⁹ Hodges, *An Impartial History of Michael Servetus*, 32.

must remember that Servetus' opposition to the Trinity was a threat to society, and Calvin could not have done nothing after the *Restitutio* was published. His ecclesial and political responsibilities demanded actions, and his moral responsibility demanded that he carry them well, but the fact that Servetus was outside of his jurisdiction forced Calvin to report Servetus to the Inquisition. Having said that, Calvin was still responsible for this and the fact that he surrendered Servetus to the Inquisition, knowing that they would certainly burn him, might be morally questionable.

Third, there have also been accusations that Calvin showed moral failure during his involvement in Servetus' trial in Geneva, indicating that he might have prosecuted Servetus out of hatred and not out of sense of justice. Van Veem, for example, states that during the trial process, Calvin's recorded visits to Servetus show "only contempt" and he "had no sympathy for his fear of death."⁶⁰ Marian Hillar, in commenting on Calvin's statement that he wanted to make Servetus repent, states, "The attempt of Calvin in writing (his statement) was to deceive the reader that he used 'all human means' and exhorted Servetus 'benignly.' The whole trial, its procedure, the conspiracy organized by Calvin to entrap Servetus – all this belies his explanation."⁶¹

However, these seem to be unfair assessments. It is quite arguable that these visits precisely show how Calvin consistently attempted to bring Servetus to orthodoxy. He even offered to forgo the personal humiliation so that Servetus could escape death. During his last conversations with Servetus, Calvin recalled that he had gone to Paris in the 1530s to meet Servetus to "gain him for the Lord." One cannot forget that, by then, Calvin was already a fugitive running from the French Catholic church. To show up in

⁶⁰ Van Veem, "Calvin and His Opponents," 162.

⁶¹ Marian Hillar, *The Case of Michael Servetus (1511-1553): The Turning Point in the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience* (Lewinston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 311.

Paris meant a great danger. Also, the trial and what Hillar calls “conspiracy” seem to be precisely for the purpose of making the blasphemer repent. A mortal punishment, however severe, was always considered better than eternal death for blasphemies.

I would argue that Hillar seems to unfairly assess Calvin and Servetus’ “moral qualities” based on the “freedom of conscience.” This category did not, and perhaps even could not, exist in those days where an anarchy in theological ideas would lead to social and political chaos. Must freedom of conscience be defended at the expense of social and ecclesiastical order? Given the situations in the sixteenth century, the answer was no. For this reason, Hillar blaming Calvin and the Protestant church for applying a “totalitarian” rule to the society to force upon morality that “was defined by the interests of the ecclesiastical party” is an unfair, and incomplete, assessment. For Calvin, a theological reconciliation, not a killing mission, was utterly important in his involvement in the affair.⁶² Calvin certainly thought that he was leading a moral crusade in the Servetus affair,⁶³ and was responsible, not for Servetus’ horrible fate, but for capturing and punishing him as a moral criminal in a civilized religion-based society.

VERDICT: INCULPABLE

This essay does not attempt to look for different spheres of the society on which the blame can be thrown away from Calvin, but it does provide an encouragement to see Calvin’s responsibility in Servetus’ affair not out of vacuum, but in conversations with the ecclesiastical, political, and moral backgrounds of the sixteenth century. It is easy to blame Calvin if one only sees the exchange of

⁶² Richard C. Gamble, “Calvin’s Controversies,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 197.

⁶³ Goldstone & Goldstone, *Out of the Flames*, 179.

arguments between the two which resulted in Calvin's "betrayal" of Servetus to the Inquisition, and finally, in Servetus' death. However, when other historical factors are considered, other facts and possibilities appear.

In the end, I shall deduce that Calvin is responsible, but not fully. Even if he is responsible, he is inculpable. He is responsible only in the sense that he played a role in each of the dimensions stated above, but he was not alone in this endeavour nor was he always the major player at any given timeline. His action of reporting Servetus to the Inquisition is morally questionable, but there were good reasons for this. Therefore, to say that Calvin is fully responsible in Servetus' affair is unfair. One cannot use modern categories to judge the action of a man in the sixteenth century world. It is observable that this is not a black and white issue, but any ethical issue, modern or otherwise, is rarely black and white.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bainton, Roland H. *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus, 1511-1553*. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1953.
- Cottret, Bernard. *Calvin: A Biography*. Translated by M. Wallace McDonald. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000.
- Gamble, Richard C. "Calvin's Controversies." In *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, edited by Donald K. McKim, 188-203. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Ganoczy, Alexandre. "Calvin's Life." In *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, edited by Donald K. McKim, 3-24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Goldstone, Lawrence & Goldstone, Nancy. *Out of the Flames: Remarkable Story of a Fearless Scholar, a Fatal Heresy, and One of the Rarest Books in the World*. New York: Broadway Books, 2002.

Gordon, Bruce. *Calvin*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Hillar, Marian. *The Case of Michael Servetus (1511-1553): The Turning Point in the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience*. Lewinston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997.

Hodges, Benjamin. *An Impartial History of Michael Servetus: Burnt Alive at Geneva for Heresy*. London: King's Arms, 1724.

Lovčić, Radovan. *Michael Servetus: Heretic or Saint?*. Dunedin: Prague House, 2008.

Naphy, William G. "Calvin's Geneva." In *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, edited by Donald K. McKim, 25-37. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2004.

Parker, T. H. L. *John Calvin*. Tring: Lion Publishing, 1975.

Pereira, Matthew J. "In the Name of the Three Headed Monster: The Contours of the Judicial Process in Servetus' Trial." *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 60.3-4 (2007): 11-34.

Rilliet, Albert. *Calvin and Servetus: The Reformer's Share in the Trial of Michael Servetus, Historically Ascertained*. Translated by W. K. Tweedie. London: John Johnstone, 1846.

Selderhuis, Herman J. *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life*. Translated by Albert Gootjes. Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009.

Tausiet, Maria. "Magus versus Falsarius: A Duel of Insults between Calvin and Servetus." *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 10.1 (2008): 59-87.

Van Veem, Mirjam G. K. "Calvin and His Opponents." In *The Calvin Handbook*, edited by Herman J. Selderhuis, 156-164. Translated by Gerrit W. Sheeres. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2009.