Calvin on Calvin

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And exploration of the execution of Servetus in Calvinist Geneva in 1553

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The execution of Servetus in Calvinist Geneva in 1553, is a historical event where religious aspects merge with social, political, economic, and personal interests in a colourful mosaic where emotions set the tune. This event which divided friends and brought together enemies has been accounted for from various points of view, but only a handful of them will be used in the bold purpose of this essay: Lindberg, Gonzalez, and Rosales whose neutrality approaches the middle of two opposites: Cottret’s where John Calvin is portrayed almost as a villain, and McGrath’s who rescues and defends the Reformer arguing that first and foremost Calvin was no “little more than a child of his age” (1). Calvin justifies Servetus tragic end (and perhaps his own actions), writing his Defence of the Orthodox Faith, immediately after the event, and declaring that regardless all human feelings, in cases of heresy, the glory of God must be maintained (2). In his writings, Calvin provides us with not only an “idea” of the particular religiosity of his times, but with a small gap from where to glimpse a more intimate Calvin.

“Life is so full of brief encounters”, wrote Bainton (3) some 30 years ago, and Fenelon, in the 17C., declared “When God sends help through one of His servants, the value of that help is not affected in any way by the servant, no matter how foul and spirituality barren that servant may be”. Perhaps this brief but intense encounter with Servetus bore a meaning for Calvin. Yet, what kind of spiritual benefits he reaped, or what fruits did he yield to God on this account we may never know. What seems clear is that Calvin seized this opportunity to achieve some more palpable goods, as Servetus execution consolidated his presence, power, and authority over 16th C. Geneva.

(1) McGrath, 1990, p. 116
(2) Lindberg, 1996, p. 269
(3) As quoted by Oberman, 1988, p. Dedication
Michael Servetus (1511-1553) humanist, physiologist, heretic and heresiarch, theologian, physician, and amateur geographer and astrologer, was born in Villanueva de Sigena, Spain, and burnt at the stake by the Calvinist government of Geneva. Well educated and well travelled he journeyed Europe as a member of Charles V Imperial court. It has been proposed, Cottret tells us, that Servetus was a Jew, based on the large numbers of marranos (quite a derogatory Spanish term meaning “pigs”) for those Jews who had converted to Christianity but who, in reality, had not adopted its principles, thus not adhering to the Trinity doctrine of One God in three distinct Persons, and which was precisely what Servetus considered an unnecessary dogma that had isolated Christianity from the other monotheisms Judaism and Islam. It was Servetus deep understanding and attachment to Judaism that fuelled the suspicious about him being a Jew, thing he always denied, declaring himself a nominal Catholic. However, his ‘Judaizing’ trends had doctrinal ramifications, since for him the validity of a Christian view would depend on whether or not Jewish sources would have accepted it. He developed and proposed to the Swiss Reformers, Oecalampadius to start with, a radical reform to Christian faith, which was not only unwelcome but strongly opposed by both Protestants and Catholics. In his various theological works Servetus argued that the union of state and church, following Constantine's conversion was apostasy and that, in promulgating the doctrine of the Trinity, the Council of Nicea had offended God. On account of his controversial theories both his De Trinitatis Errobus (On the Error of the Trinity, 1531) and his Dialogorum de Trinitate Liri Duo (Second Book of Dialogues on the Trinity, 1532) were burnt, and he was tried for heresy and imprisoned by the Catholic Inquisition in France, from where he managed to escape.

\(\text{[Footnotes]} \)

- Rosales, 1978, p. 3472 (my translation)
- Microsoft Encarta 99 Encyclopedia (c) 1993-1998
- Livingstone, 1996, p. 470
- Cottret, 2000, p. 213
- Gonzalez, 1985, p. 67

In 1553, Servetus published, as an anonymous work, the book that pushed his
tragic dead, his *Christianismi Restitutio*; recognizing the authorship Calvin denounced him to the Inquisition\(^{(10)}\). Servetus was arrested while attending church in Geneva, and Calvin prepared a list of 38 accusations against him\(^{(11)}\). Servetus was convicted of heresy and blasphemy against Christianity, and executed on October 27\(^{th}\), 1553. His theological doctrines denote an influence from Plotinus as the Trinity of the Divine Persons is reduced to some aspects from a One essential reality\(^{(12)}\). As a physician and physiologist, Servetus made great contributions to Medicine by discovering the pulmonary circulation and the role of the respiratory function in the transformation from venous to arterial blood\(^{(12-13)}\). Lindberg proposes that this discovery might have been prompted by Servetus concern to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit entered the blood system through the nose, since “respiration is inspiration; the soul resides in the blood” (Gen 9:4; Lev 17:11)\(^{(13)}\).

After a failed encounter in Paris 1534, and although Servetus had been having pseudonymous correspondence with Calvin and the latter had recognized him through his writings\(^{(13)}\), it was not until 1546 that both men finally met and so began a relationship which, Cottret relates, was tinted by a mixture of fascination and repulsion\(^{(14)}\). Curiously similar to Antonio Salieri’s relationship with Mozart, whom Salieri considered a formidable and unbeatable rival, and in his envy and jealousy intrigued against Mozart insatiably, eager to destroy him to the point that legend has Salieri as the murderer of Mozart. Salieri’s grew old embittered and peevish\(^{(15)}\). And, McGrath tells us about Calvin “his ferocious verbal assaults upon Servetus (...) confirm Calvin’s increasing pettiness and bitterness as old age approached”\(^{(16)}\).

\(^{(10)}\)Livingstone, 1996, p. 470  
\(^{(11)}\)Gonzalez, 1985, p. 67  
\(^{(12)}\)Rosales, 1978, p. 3472 (my translation)  
\(^{(13)}\)Lindberg, 1996, p. 268  
\(^{(14)}\)Cottret, 2000, p. 214  
\(^{(15)}\)Microsoft Encarta 99 Encyclopedia. 1993-1998  
\(^{(16)}\)McGrath, 1990, p. 119
Rivalry, says Cottret, began the very same moment they met with Servetus trying to instruct Calvin in Christology and infant baptism and referring him to his *Restitutio* manuscript, and Calvin reacting by urging Servetus to read and meditate on the work of his life, his *Institutes*. Servetus complied but to Calvin’s horror he returned the copy of this work full of critical annotations on the margins. Insulting comments, Lindberg tells us, which enraged Calvin who could not permit anyone to debate his *Institutes*, and so sent all this correspondence to a friend in Vienna, who delivered it to the Inquisition in Lyon to persecute the Spaniard. A “blissful” moment when two arch-enemies Catholics and Protestants worked together for a one single cause: punishing the heretic. Calvin cut all correspondence with Servetus, and in two letters, written on February 13, 1547, one to Frellon and the other to Farel, Calvin let his contempt and anger flow. In his letter to Frellon, Calvin once again criticizes and condemns Servetus “arrogance and lack of humility” and wishes he could “find the means of reducing him to sense (...) for he has written to me in such an arrogant spirit (...) For I assure you that there is no lesson more necessary to him than to learn humility, which will come to him from the spirit of God, not otherwise”. And, in his letter to Farel, Calvin declares: “Servetus recently sent me with his letters a new volume of his ravings (...) He would come here if I agreed. (...) for if he came, as far as my authority goes, I would not let him leave alive”, putting together these letters it can be seen that the so much criticized arrogance and pride of Servetus are features of Calvin too, flaunting behind his “authority” and preying over Servetus life as Calvin not able to “reduce him” “would not let him leave alive”. In this opportunity that Calvin’s writings offer to look closer and more intimately at him, we can capture two things, first Calvin projecting unto his rival the same “defects of character” he owns. And second the desire to “reduce” or “annihilate” these negative features.

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(16) Cottret, 2000, p. 217
(17) Lindberg, 1996, p. 268
(18) As quoted by Cottret, 2000, p. 217
Servetus became the outer expression of Calvin's "shadow" as Mozart was to Sallieri, thus accounting for the fascination/repulsion relationship, which Cottret mentions in his work\(^{(19)}\). And so it is that a want to kill what cannot be accepted or even tolerated in us is a natural response (please refer to Appendix 1 for an explanation of the terms projection and shadow).

Through his writings Calvin allows us a glimpse of the inner Calvin, the monumental figure of a hard working, dedicated, and determined Reformer, holds within a body assaulted by infirmities derived from stress and tension\(^{(20)}\) a tormented soul with a feeble trust in God. Calvin reflects this in his letter to Frellon, as he contradicts himself when in a "gala of faith" he writes that Servetus needs to 'learn humility, which will come to him from the spirit of God, not otherwise'\(^{(21)}\), although, just some lines above, Calvin recounts how hard he has tried to reduce Servetus into humility and sense. Was God given enough time to change Servetus? Lindberg refers us to Bouwsma who suggests in this regard that "even more erosive" than his physical ailments was Calvin's internal tension between his trust in God and his own need to control and to achieve\(^{(22)}\). We cannot judge Calvin harshly or in depth just from two of his writings, but we can maybe propose that his personality might have been another aspect contributing to Servetus execution. And that possibly yes, as McGrath says, he was a child of his era, one who fall victim of his own purposes and task in life. For, although Calvin and Geneva were congratulated and applauded for the execution of Servetus, we may never know if these reactions were sincere or born out of fear as others could see the extremes Calvin could go to. Castellio not in fear but in truth wrote: "To burn a heretic is not to defend a doctrine, but to kill a man"\(^{(23)}\).

\[\text{Life is full of brief encounters ...} \]

Roland H. Bainton, 1978

\(^{(19)}\) Cottret, 2000, p. 214
\(^{(20)}\) Lindberg, 1996, p. 271
\(^{(21)}\) As quoted by Cottret, 2000, p. 217
\(^{(22)}\) As quoted by Lindberg, 1996, p. 271
\(^{(23)}\) As quoted by Lindberg, 1996, p. 269
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Microsoft(R) Encarta(R) 99 Encyclopedia. (c) 1993-1998 Microsoft Corporation, arts., Michael Servetus, John Calvin, and Antonio Salieri


(*) (**) Refer to front cover pictures of Servetus and Calvin
Appendix I

Projection:

1. In classical psychoanalysis, the process by which one's own traits, emotions, dispositions, etc., are ascribed to another. Typically used here with the implication that there is an accompanying denial that one has these feelings or tendencies, that the projection functions as a defense mechanism to protect the individual from anxiety and that some underlying conflict has been repressed.

2. In psychodynamic theories, the process of ascribing unwittingly one's beliefs, values or other subjective processes to others.

3. The perceiving of events and environmental stimuli (particularly ambiguous ones) in terms of one's own expectations, needs, desires, etc.

4. The attribution of one's own faults and short-comings to another.


Projective identification: Similar to projection (1,2,3,) but with a twist: the individual does not fully disavow what a is projected. Instead, the person remains aware of his/her own feelings or impulses, but misattributes them and regards them as being justifiable reactions to the behaviour of the other persons involved.


Shadow: The archetype of evil, opposite to the conscious ideal of self. In Analytical Psychology, it is the unconscious deposit in all human beings of all the negative aspects feelings or behaviours condemned by or unacceptable to society.

Rentz, 1997, pp. 194-8

The Unconscious: Cannot be studied directly but inferred from behaviours. The clinical evidence for postulating the Unconscious includes:

1) Dreams, as symbolic representations of needs, wishes, and conflicts
2) Slips of the tongue and forgetting
3) Posthypnotic suggestions
4) Free-association
5) Projection
6) Symbolic content of Psychotic symptoms

Corey, 2001, p. 70