

The Perfect Storm: A Survey of Influences Affecting the Fate of Michael Servetus

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The Life and Thought of the Christian Church: 1500 A.D. to Present

HCUS 5020

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April 4, 2005

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In his book, *The Perfect Storm*, Sebastian Junger recounts the tragic demise of the sword-fishing boat Andrea Gail in October of 1991. Although guided by a highly experienced captain, the Andrea Gail was destroyed by a union of weather conditions forming a “perfect storm.” Labeled such by the National Weather Service, this weather system was the result of the unique convergence of several lesser storms, individually survivable, but insurmountable when magnified by their amalgamation.¹ Michael Servetus found himself in caught in a “perfect storm” of sorts in the fall of 1553, ultimately resulting in his own destruction. A confluence of religious, cultural, and political conditions joined to form an intractable situation for Servetus; tried and branded a heretic, he would find his end at the stake, just outside of Geneva. The merging of these influences must be examined within the context of the life story of Servetus, most particularly his final years; before turning to the affect of these essentials, a biography of Servetus is in order.

Around 1510, Michael Servetus was born in the Aragon region of Spain, to a devout Roman Catholic family. As a young man, Servetus entered the service of Franciscan friar Juan Quintana, necessitating travel abroad, first to France and then Toulouse. At the University of Toulouse, Servetus studied law for several years before

¹ Sebastian Junger, *The Perfect Storm: a True Story of Men Against the Sea* (New York: Norton, 1997).

being recalled to service by Quintana; Quintana had been appointed as the confessor of Charles the Fifth. With Quintana, Servetus traveled to Bologna in 1530 attending the Coronation of the Emperor. Here in Bologna, the young Spaniard witnessed Pope Clement VII being carried majestically through the streets; the pomp and circumstance offended Servetus, in revulsion, he turned his back on the old Church. Abandoning his legal studies, Servetus headed for northern Europe, the center of German Protestantism.

Servetus first settled in Basel, now more interested in biblical languages, theology, and philosophy rather than the law. Here he met the Swiss reformer Oecolampadius, who was soon disturbed by Servetus' growing unorthodox views. With malevolence towards him developing in Basel, Servetus relocated to Strasburg in 1531. In this city he met Protestant Reformer Martin Bucer and mingled with some Anabaptist leaders. Here Servetus published his first theological work, *De Trinitatis Erroribus* (On the Errors of the Trinity). Just passed twenty years of age, Servetus argued that tripartite nature of God was unscriptural, supporting his claim with citations from both early church fathers and non-patristic sources. *De Trinitatis Erroribus* showed signs of haste and was not exemplary of his best writing, but given his youth, it was quite impressive.

Servetus' first work immediately provoked attacks by both Roman Catholics and Protestants alike; Luther, Zwingli, Oecolampadius, and Bucer among others all sharply criticized it. In order to placate the aroused Strasburg officials, Servetus was coerced to publish a recantation. Servetus responded with his second work *Dialogorum de Trinitate* (Dialogues on the Trinity), more moderate in tone, but unrepentant of his controversial Trinitarian thought. The young Spaniard simply renounced imperfections and incomplete

thought in his first work. With this publication, opinions of him were no better, if not worse. Michael Servetus chose to move on, leaving Strasburg for Lyon.

In Lyon, Servetus lived under the assumed name of Michel de Villeneuve, working as an editor for the Trechsel brothers, owners of a scholarly printing firm. In this position, Servetus, now Villeneuve, edited numerous works notably two publications of Ptolemy's *Geography*, and one edition of Santes Pagnini's Bible. Interspersed in his editing career Servetus studied medicine at the University of Paris. In 1537 he published his first medical book, on the therapeutic value of syrups; the *Discourse on Syrups* was popular, posting five editions in ten years. Servetus was accomplished in his medical studies as well; it has been suggested he played an important role in the discovery of pulmonary circulation of the blood. Adding to his divergent interests, Servetus also studied astrology, giving unauthorized lectures in judicial astrology at the University. In 1538, charges were brought against Servetus by leaders of the University, providing a sufficient defense, he was acquitted; nonetheless censured and forbidden to further lecture on judicial astrology, whether in public or private.

Withdrawing from Paris, Servetus (still under the alias Villeneuve) settled in Vienne, a suburb of Lyon; for twelve years practicing medicine and working with the local printers. Never having lost his interest in theology, it was during this period, specifically 1545, that Servetus began exchanging letters with John Calvin of Geneva. Preliminary polite correspondence soon degenerated into mutual hostility. Initially feigning as an eager learner, Servetus had posed a series of theological questions to Calvin. Calvin answered his inquiries, providing his discussion partner with a copy of his *Institutes*. Dissatisfied with his responds, Servetus preceded to correct Calvin's theology

by returning to him a copy of his *Institutes*, marred with his own scribbled commentary throughout. With this response he attached a draft copy of his manuscript *Restitutio*, a new defense of his views on the Trinity combined with additional challenges to infant baptism and other principles espoused by Calvin. That which began as collegial conversation now deteriorated to the point where Calvin would no longer respond.

In 1553 Servetus completed the manuscript he transmitted to Calvin, greatly expanded and augmented, this final version even included an appendix which contained Servetus' letters to Calvin. Under the title *Christianismi Restitutio*, Michael Servetus had published a complete statement of his mature theological views. This provocative piece restated his controversial Trinitarian doctrines, explored millenarianism, and sanctioned believer baptism (adult). Although printed secretly and anonymously at Vienne, the authorship did not remain concealed for very long. Calvin, having received a copy of this despised work, was instrumental in providing the identity of Servetus to local authorities. Servetus was arrested and charged with heresy, summarily put on trial before the Roman Catholic Inquisition. Perceiving his trial as going poorly, Servetus deceived his jailer, scaled the prison garden wall, and made a daring early morning escape from Vienne.

From Vienne, Servetus planned to make for Italy, but for reasons unknown, he appears in Geneva next, four months later. Finding himself in Geneva on a Sunday morning, as if magnetically attracted, Servetus attended Calvin's church to hear him preach. Inside the church Michael Servetus was promptly recognized by visitors from Lyon who informed Calvin of his presence. Calvin immediately lodged charges of heresy with the local town council, who subsequently arrested and jailed Servetus. Commanded to appear before the council, Servetus was defiant and the syndics showed

reluctance to proceed with the case. To resolve this impasse, the magistrates sought the advice of other leading Swiss churches. After circulating the charges against Servetus along with his response to their accusations, the judgments of the other Swiss churches were returned to Geneva. All condemned Servetus views strongly, effectively sealing his fate. On October 27, 1553 Michael Servetus was summoned to hear the council's verdict of guilt; without delay he was led to the stake at Champel, just outside Geneva.²

The Life story of Michael Servetus is frequently told only within the context of his relationship to John Calvin. Servetus is seen as the quintessential example of John Calvin's intolerance towards divergent belief. It is presupposed by many that sans John Calvin, Servetus would not have been executed in Geneva; as if Calvin's denunciation of the heretic was sufficient in and of itself to seal his fate. While Calvin's contributions in the matter were significant, in all actuality Servetus' untimely demise was nearly inevitable; resultant of cultural, religious, and political influences converging in his adult life, staged in the sixteenth century.

The cultural setting for the life of Michael Servetus is the era of the Renaissance.³ The Renaissance involved a rebirth of knowledge, the classical spirit, and a rationalistic outlook on life. Along with rationalistic perspectives and thought patterns of the classical

² This abbreviated synopsis of the life of Michael Servetus was abridged from a collection of resources including: Roland H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1953), and Roland H. Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty: Nine Biographical Studies* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1951), and J.D. Douglas, Philip W. Comfort and Donald Mitchell, eds., *Who's Who in Christian History* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House, 1992), and Andrew Pettegree, "Michael Servetus and The Limits of Tolerance," *History Today* 40, no. 2 (Feb 1990).

³ Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 4.

world, came a new humanistic orientation. This individualistic spirit was buoyed by new wealth, renewed interest in literature, education and art; resulting in a focus on existence in this world instead of preparation for the next. The “Renaissance man” placed great confidence in human ability, desiring a “full-orbed” personality capable of mastering all skills and disciplines.⁴ Servetus aptitude for medicine, geography, Biblical scholarship, and theology are exemplary of this type of “universal man.”⁵ Scholars have suggested that Servetus’ humanist orientation was initiated by Erasmian influence during his early years in Spain.⁶ Emperor Charles was educated in the Netherlands and surrounded himself with admirers of Erasmus;⁷ who adopted his disdain for abuses of the Church and appreciation for restoring Christianity to its original purity and simplicity.⁸

The ideals of the Renaissance, with its faith in humanity, were noble, but nonetheless in tension with the still God-centered orientation of the day.⁹ The elevation of humanity was interpreted by many as the degradation of divinity.¹⁰ Religious tolerance both in word and concept did not exist in the sixteenth century. Religious tolerance as

⁴ Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty*, 79.

⁵ Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 4.

⁶ Marian Hillar, *The Case of Michael Servetus (1511-1555): The Turning Point in The Struggle for Freedom of Conscience*, Text Studies in Religion, vol. 74 (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 189-190.

⁷ Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 9.

⁸ Hillar, *The Case of Michael Servetus*, 189-190.

⁹ Rousas John Rushdoony, "Calvin In Geneva: The Sociology Of Justification By Faith," *Westminster Theological Journal* 15 (Nov 1952): 16.

¹⁰ Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty*, 79.

championed in our day would appear impious in the era of the sixteenth century. As derived from Latin, the French words *tolerer* and *tolerance* were not applied to religious dissidents, being more pragmatic than philosophical. To “tolerate” was to permit or suffer what one could not extinguish.¹¹ Both Roman Catholic and Reformer would certainly rather extinguish than permit heterodoxy. The execution of Michael Servetus is exemplary of this attitude.

Heretics of the sixteenth century were hunted down and destroyed by the thousands. As example, Marian Hillar reports Cardinal de Tournon enforcing an edict in which two thousand men women and children, considered to be heretics, were murdered in February of 1545.¹² Alister McGrath provides similar examples citing: mass executions after the Peasant’s War, the siege at Munster, and the ruthless policy of the execution of Roman Catholic priests in Elizabethan England.¹³ Although foreign to our modern sensibilities, in this era of the execution of heretics was considered routine. Almost everyone during the sixteenth century believed that obstinate heretics should be punished by death, even Michael Servetus himself. During his trial in Geneva, while arguing for tolerance with regard to doctrinal matters, he requested the death penalty for Calvin on grounds of heresy.¹⁴

¹¹ Cottret, Bernard, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 206-207.

¹² Hillar, *The Case of Michael Servetus*, 265.

¹³ Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), 115.

¹⁴ Eric Kayayan, "The Case of Michel Servetus: The background and the unfolding of the case," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 8 (Fall 1992): 143.

Christian heretics were not always executed merely because of their radical ideas but sometimes because of larger social agendas. Theological issues were many times a veneer for deeper socio-political concerns. Often the Church moved quickly against heresy because of its potential to destabilize its power.¹⁵ Roland Bainton states, “Religious diversity is not incompatible with social stability. But few at that time believed it possible and their belief made them right.”¹⁶ When Servetus under his assumed name, arrived in Paris, the ruling powers were of the opinion that diversity in religion was a menace to public tranquility.¹⁷ A cultural tempest was brewing on the horizon, growing closer to Michael Servetus, radical of the Renaissance.

Birthing the Protestant Reformation, the sixteenth century could certainly be characterized as an age of religious turmoil. The power and influence of the Catholic Church, was being challenged by Protestant Reformers. Reform was principally initiated by concerns over corrupt church practices; many essential dogmas and doctrines continued to be shared between the Reformers and the Catholic Church. Much of what Michael Servetus was accused of heresy for was found in the dogmatic ground common to both Protestants and Catholics. As a result, traditional theological antagonists of Rome, Wittenberg, Geneva and Zurich joined in mutual repudiation of Michael Servetus. Bainton begins his study of the heretic stating, “Michael Servetus has the singular

¹⁵ McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, 117-118.

¹⁶ Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 76.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

distinction of having been burned by the Catholics in effigy and by the Protestants in actuality.”¹⁸

Jerome Friedman describes Michael Servetus as “the complete heretic.”¹⁹ Servetus rejection of orthodoxy included such tenets as; infant baptism, Christ’s humanity, original sin, conventional concepts of prophecy and scripture and the orthodox trinity. No less radical than his rejection of orthodoxy were the views he advocated, namely: millenarianism, believer baptism, Christ’s celestial flesh, redemption through sin, and modalism.²⁰ Servetus embraced Christianity Pre-Nicaea, believing that the idea of the tripartite God was inherited from Greek philosophy. The church he understood had long ago deviating from its course and headed towards polytheism. His works are regarded by many as a mixture of gnosticism, pantheism and gospel.²¹ These were the common grounds both Protestant Reformers and Orthodox Catholics shared, consequently both condemned Servetus as heterodox.

Servetus however believed he was defending true Christianity by rejecting the historical landmarks of the past.²² He did not conceive of his views as particularly innovative, rather in the spirit of reformation, Servetus believed his views were well

¹⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹⁹ Jerome Friedman, *Michael Servetus: A Case Study in Total Heresy* (Geneva: Librairies Droz S.A, 1978), 133.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Kayayan, "The Case of Michel Servetus," 119-120.

²² Friedman, *Michael Servetus*, 133.

grounded in early Christian history.²³ This heretic of the sixteenth century believed himself a proponent of true Christianity; his persecutors representing “traditional heresy.”²⁴ As with most reformers of this century, Servetus conceived of one truth found in his own writings. Jerome Friedman jests, “Servetus thus represented a most extreme fringe of the Reformation Merry-Go-Round where all go around in circles condemning everyone else in a universal attempt to grasp an illusory brass ring.”²⁵ Without question in this match he was disadvantaged, without the followers or institutional clout enjoyed by his adversaries, Servetus was on a collision course with titanic religious forces, closing in every direction.

The culture and religious climate of the sixteenth century were broad all encompassing influences affecting the fate of Michael Servetus as well as his contemporaries. Political affect on his fate however, was localized to that of the city state Geneva. It has been purported by many that Geneva was firmly in the grasp of Calvin during the time period of the Servetus affair. Marian Hillar asserts, “Calvin in fact established a dictatorship, becoming a civil and religious dictator. Geneva itself was nicknamed Protestant Rome and Calvin himself – the Pope of the reformation.”²⁶ Concurring, Stefan Zweig calls Calvin, “The theocratic dictator of Geneva.”²⁷ Others

²³ Ibid., 134

²⁴ Ibid., 113

²⁵ Ibid., 114

²⁶ Hillar, *The Case of Michael Servetus*, 287.

²⁷ Stefan Zweig, *The Right to Heresy: Castellio against Calvin* (New York: The Viking Press, 1936), 1.

wholeheartedly object, noting that Calvin's situation in Geneva at this time was quite tenuous. Having recently excommunicated a leader of the Libertine party, Calvin faced a trial of strength with his adversaries; if he lost the contest it would certainly force his exile.²⁸ Alister McGrath avers, "the myth of the great dictator of Geneva is embedded in popular religious and historical writing... where this myth is not a total invention, it is a serious distortion of historical facts."²⁹ McGrath contends Calvin's Geneva theocracy is only justifiably in terms of the reformer's view of a regime in which all authority is recognized to derive from God.³⁰

Actually, the city state was governed by a Council consisting of 24 male citizens of Geneva, including four syndics. Virtually every area of public life was subject to their scrutiny, and they intended no aspect to slip beyond their control.³¹ The trial, condemnation, and execution (including mode) of Michael Servetus were entirely the responsibility of this corporate body.³² The primary body in Geneva for the purpose of maintaining ecclesiastical discipline was the Consistory. Formed in 1542, it was composed of twelve lay elders and all members of the Venerable Company of Pastors. Calvin conceived of this body primarily as an instrument for policing religious

²⁸ Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty*, 89.

²⁹ McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, 105.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 106

³¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

³² *Ibid.*, 116

orthodoxy.³³ In the Servetus incident this ecclesiastical body was bypassed altogether, possibly to marginalize Calvin in the affair.³⁴

Calvin's enemies on the council combined with the autocratic nature of the group might have worked in favor of Servetus had the council not sought advice beyond their chambers. Apparently feeling a measure of insecurity, leaders on the council sought guidance from neighboring Swiss Protestant cities. When responses were received, all recommended severity, although none suggested the death penalty. It seems every city had some dissenting minority, which might explain not counseling for execution.³⁵ After receiving these verdicts, it is unlikely Servetus could be exonerated.³⁶ Protestant and Roman Catholic city officials might differ on many concerns, but they were united that heresy threatened the stability and existence of their domains. The radical wing of the Reformation had cause problems in Zurich, Munster, Strasburg and elsewhere. These potent memories coupled with Servetus perceived alignment with the Anabaptists (his denial of infant baptism), evoked a strong response from the Geneva council.³⁷ Servetus was perceived as a concrete threat surpassing speculative theological irritation. A political storm erupted joining the confluence of cultural and religious systems which has already hemmed Michael Servetus' routes of escape.

³³ Ibid., 111-113

³⁴ Ibid., 116

³⁵ Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty*, 92-93.

³⁶ Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 181.

³⁷ McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, 119.

Returning to our analogy, the captain of the *Andrea Gail*, lost at sea in 1991, was a highly experienced pilot known for his expertise and proclivity for risk taking. Highly competitive, brash, and confident, Billy Tyre had been through many a nor'easter, no storm could best him. Yet the flowing together of three storm systems proved too much for his abilities. It was “the perfect storm,” overwhelming expertise, efforts, and confidence. The only safe place that October was in the harbor, already full with the vessels of more prudent unadventurous captains.

Michael Servetus and the captain are kindred spirits. Embodying the character of the Renaissance, the Spaniard was confident in himself and humanity. Brash and highly competitive, Servetus regularly challenged religious authority based on his understanding of the truth. An expert in many different arenas, Servetus was not content with “safe” answers, but asked questions which frequently got him in trouble. Yet Michael Servetus, in spite of his expertise, efforts and confidence was overpowered by the cultural, religious, and political influences of his day.

In spite of being labeled a heretic, Servetus was a pious and devout man, his writings reflect quotes from the Bible and texts full of prayers to Christ.³⁸ Servetus believed he was faithful to the spirit and the word of the Bible by rejecting later speculations as read and the text. His strong conviction in his opinions led to accusations of arrogance in inflexibility. These strong convictions also led to his demise. Safe and prudent theologians stay in their ecumenical harbors. Servetus chose stormy theological waters understanding the risk to his life. His beliefs we regard as heterodox, yet he

³⁸ Friedman, *Michael Servetus*, 258.

understood and bore the fatal consequence of proclaiming them. Surely he was convicted in his own heart they were worth the price of his life.

From our modern perspective we are revolted by the intolerance of the sixteenth century. How barbaric is it that people should die for differences of religious opinion. It is horrendous that life could be taken in the name of God. We absolve past individuals of their personal responsibility, transferring the guilt to the cultural, religious and political environment of their day. With the advancement of time and our new appreciation of tolerance, we now assess our cultural, religious and political environment as superior to theirs. Yet is this true? What has the confluence of these factors brought in our age of tolerance? Roland Bainton awakens us to the frailty of this contention saying, “We are today horrified that Geneva should have burned a man for the glory of God, yet we incinerate whole cities for the saving of democracy.”³⁹ Are we not better served by those who will risk the label “heretic” than those who will safely bear the brand “hypocrite?”

³⁹ Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty*, 94.

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