

AUTHOR'S NOTES

An Innocent: fact and fiction

In these notes I give more historical background to the Servetus story, explain what I have fictionalised for the purposes of the screenplay and reflect on the resonance of the story for us today.

Servetus' medical discovery

Servetus' description that blood flows from the right to the left side of the heart through the lungs was buried in a couple of pages in his main work of theology, *The Restitution of Christianity*, a work of more than 700 pages. Because of the mass destruction of the publication, his scientific discovery was lost for 140 years.

But was Servetus in fact the first to describe the flow of blood through the lungs? The answer is no and yes. No, because the first published description was actually by the Arab physician, Ibn Al Nafis, in the 13th century. He noted that the septum (inner wall) of the heart is too thick to allow blood to seep through it from the right to the left sides as had been thought since the work of Galen in Roman times. Ibn Al Nafis realised that the blood must flow from the right side to the left through the main vessels that connect the heart to the lungs. His description, however, was not discovered in Europe until the 1920s and there is nothing to suggest that Servetus knew about it. The Englishman William Harvey, who published the description of the full circulation of the blood round the body in 1628, did not know of the work of Servetus. He ascribed the discovery of the blood flow through the lungs to Realdo Columbus, an Italian anatomist who had published a description of it in 1559. This was, however, six years after the (aborted) publication of Servetus' book in 1553. Also Servetus had sent a manuscript copy of his book to Calvin as early as 1546, which clearly gives Servetus precedence over Columbus in making the discovery.

More significant than exact publication dates, though, is the fact that Servetus made a crucial observation not described by either Ibn Al Nafis or Columbus. This was that the blood changes colour - becomes red - as it passes through the lungs. We now know this is a consequence of the blood taking oxygen up from the air. This observation certainly secures the place of Servetus in medical history. He made an original, though not the first, description of the flow of blood through the lungs, but he was the first to publish an experimental observation that points to its critical physiological significance.

Servetus' religious heresies

Servetus included his medical discovery in his great work of theology because he saw the study of nature as an important entry point for the understanding of God, who was the world's creator. God had made nature and for Servetus God was in all natural things. He wanted to unite natural history with theology. Following this line of thought he even flirted with astrology. This pantheism of Servetus was, however, the least of his theological infractions.

His most serious heresy from a theological standpoint must have been his rejection of the concept of the Holy Trinity. This dogma had been formulated to square a problem for early Christianity, namely, how to characterise Jesus Christ as being not merely divine but non-inferior to God the Father, while at the same time maintaining continuity with Judaic monotheism. Many people both before and since Servetus have had difficulty with the idea that there can be one God and yet somehow three. Servetus asked rhetorically: "Can it be that a mere confusion of mind should be an adequate object of faith?" Servetus accepted Christ as divine. He was the Son created by the Father at a certain point in time in order to

communicate with Man. But he could not accept the dogma's prescription that Christ and the Holy Spirit were distinct Persons of a Godhead who were coeternal and coequal with God the Father. For Servetus, Christ and the Holy Spirit were simply different forms of an indivisible God. It must seem extraordinary to most people today that such a pernicky difference in concept could lead a person to death at the stake.

Servetus' other major heresy was that of adult baptism. He rejected original sin inherited from Adam, writing: "Guilt can never be incurred through another's deed, but only by one's own." He held that infant baptism, claimed as necessary to neutralise original sin, was both unnecessary and ritualistic. He argued: "They seem to try to befuddle me who say that the salvation of an unconscious infant depends on my will to baptise it or leave it unbaptised." Servetus fiercely believed that a basic tenet of the Protestant Reformation was freedom of religious conscience. Baptism should be only a voluntary act of an adult consciously accepting the Christian faith. This was to revert to the practice of the early Church.

He also vehemently opposed the doctrine of predestination so strongly espoused by Calvin. The main principle of the Reformation was that salvation was achieved through inner faith. This was in contradistinction to the dispensation of salvation by the Roman Catholic Church based on an outward appearance of 'good works'. But according to predestination, faith and salvation were preordained by God for certain people only ('the elect') irrespective of their apparent merits. Others ('the reprobate') were destined for damnation whatever they thought or did. Servetus believed in free will, the choosing of faith freely and the achievement of faith through understanding. Servetus wrote to Calvin: "Though God may deal with us as the potter deals with his clay, it does not follow that we are nothing more than clay and have no power of action in ourselves." Servetus held that predestination was simply fate and a restraint on human will. For him, faith was the fruit of freedom.

Servetus defended his theology by an appeal to early Christianity. The dogma of the Trinity was promulgated at the Council of Nicaea convened by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th century. This same council created a union of Church and State, which transformed heresy from a theological dispute into a crime punishable in secular law. Not long after, St. Augustine introduced the theory of infant baptism to negate original sin. By this time, according to Servetus, the Church was already corrupted.

I have titled this screenplay *An Innocent* because the title has a double meaning. The first is that Servetus was innocent of any crime in reformed Geneva. The second, and the more significant, is that for Servetus the Reformation was about its spiritual content. He was plainly innocent of the intensely political nature of the Reformation - and for that he paid dearly.

The official Reformation and freedom of religious conscience: plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

When Servetus was interrogated by the Inquisition in France he lied about his authorship of heretical writings. He had no truck with Roman Catholicism and just wanted to get out of their hands. It was quite different when he was questioned in Geneva. For Servetus he was in a reformed city, he was safe and he could air his views openly. How wrong he was.

The official Reformation of Luther and Calvin was not a movement for liberty. It was conservative. It was a piece in the jigsaw of the changing landscape from a feudal agrarian Europe under the thrall of the Roman Catholic Church to city and nation states, which wanted political autonomy, appropriation of church assets and space for a rising urban mercantile and manufacturing bourgeoisie. These states needed their own churches fashioned to the new age and under national jurisdiction. This the Protestant churches furnished and none more systematically than John Calvin's reformed church in Geneva.

Yes, the Reformation went back to scripture and was for freedom of religious conscience. Luther had written: "No one has the right to impose obligation upon a Christian man without his own consent." But when the reformers set up their own Churches they faced the problem of dissent and they came to limit freedom of conscience to themselves. For the man in the street the Reformation was a substitution of a new church authority for the old. The established Protestant Churches persecuted religious opposition with as much zeal as the Catholics and they suppressed dissidents within the reforming movement with no less ferocity. In due course Calvin, in alliance with the civil authorities, would impose a repressive theocracy in Geneva that the Taliban would have been proud of.

Anabaptists – the left wing of the Reformation

The ideology of the Reformation was liberating and, despite the intentions of the religious leadership, it unleashed social forces that were revolutionary. These were expressed in the truly popular movement known as Anabaptism, which spread in Germany and across Europe in the 16th century during the relative freedom of the early Reformation.

The Anabaptists were heterogeneous groups of independent activists drawn especially from artisan, peasant and lower educated classes. They established religious settlements with varying degrees of fanaticism, communal ownership of goods and resistance to secular government. Many were of sober, industrious people who observed strict religious discipline, saw the Church as a brotherhood and wanted to make the real world fit the vision of Christian love. Some were pacifist, others were far from it and the movement had a strong element of social protest. At this time, price inflation was further impoverishing the poor while feudal lords, feeling the pressure of rising commercial forces, were increasing their exactions on the peasantry. Anabaptists led the Peasants War in Germany and the rebellion at Münster in Westphalia, and both insurrections suppressed with the approval of Luther.

What these sects held in common was a belief in religious toleration and freedom of conscience. They tried to put into practice what they understood to be the main objective of the Reformation, namely, to allow each person to establish his own relationship with God. They rejected infant baptism and believed in the baptism of adults as a voluntary profession of the Christian faith. Some were also anti-trinitarian. The movement was savagely put down around Europe by Catholics and Protestants alike.

There is no evidence that Servetus took any part in the politics of Anabaptism, but his theology certainly coincided with that of the movement. At the time of his trial, Geneva was not long independent from the Catholic duke-bishop of Savoy and the different classes were contending for the inheritance of power. The city had experienced periodic civil unrest. The Geneva Council was initially reluctant to convict Servetus and pass the death sentence on him, despite Calvin's demand for this. But they must have been unnerved by the association of Servetus' views with those of the Anabaptist movement and they eventually complied, with even more cruelty than Calvin had requested.

An interesting Genevan postscript

In the area of Champel in Geneva where Servetus was executed stands a small, obscure monument to the event. It figures at the end of the screenplay. The simple stone tablet bears the following inscription (here translated from the French): "*Respectful and grateful sons of Calvin, our great reformer, but condemning one error, which was that of his century, and firmly attached to the freedom of conscience according to the true principles of the Reformation and the Gospel, we have erected this expiatory monument.*" The inscription is dated 27 October 1903, which was the 350th anniversary to the day of Servetus' execution.

This monument is revealing in a number of respects, not just by what it says but also by what it does not say. In the first place, it shows that the guilt of Calvin's responsibility for Servetus' death was still weighing heavily on the shoulders of Genevan Calvinists 350 years later - so telling was Calvin's action a betrayal of the Reformation principle. Second, the attempt to soften the extent of Calvin's guilt by claiming that it was 'an error of his century' is quite weak. There were plenty of critics at the time accusing Calvin of setting up a new inquisition and saying there was now a pope in Geneva well as in Rome. Voices for religious toleration were certainly around if Calvin had wanted to hear them. Third, the subject was evidently still so sensitive in Geneva in 1903 that the writers of the inscription chose not to declare openly what the 'error' was that Calvin committed, nor give the name of the victim who was on the receiving end of it. The monument is off a road named after *Michel Servet*, but the connection of the monument with Servetus is nowhere made explicit. Finally, those responsible for this commemorative stone, decent as they were in wanting to acknowledge what was, in effect, an act of judicial murder, did not have the courage to say exactly who they were, although we can infer that they had the permission of the Genevan authorities. But for all its inadequacies, this monument does exhibit some contrition for Servetus' execution on the part of some of Calvin's successors.

The screenplay: fact and fiction

I wrote this screenplay for two reasons. The first is that it tells a cracking, true life story that deserves to be better known. The second is that the lessons of the story are still relevant to us four centuries later. I have written a screenplay, not a history, and some of my account is simplified and fictionalised, both to service the drama and allow me to offer an interpretation of the events for a 21st century audience. But all of the substance of the history, and indeed much of its detail, are accurately told.

The presentation of Servetus' medical discovery is schematic and simplified. The experimental work that Servetus must have carried out would have been on animals, not on a human cadaver as I portray for a more immediate effect. The two great scientific publications of this time, both appearing in 1543, were *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* by Nicolas Copernicus and *On the Structure of the Human Body* by Andreas Vesalius. Servetus succeeded Vesalius as dissector in the medical faculty of the University of Paris, but I know of no evidence that they actually worked together. However, to acknowledge the debt that Servetus likely owed to Vesalius, the founder of modern anatomy, I present Servetus' discovery as a kind of joint enterprise: Vesalius is (correctly) credited with disproving the existence of the septal pores necessary for Galen's blood flow theory, while Servetus of course is credited with discovering the flow of blood through the lungs. One of the anatomy teachers of Vesalius and Servetus in Paris, Jacobus Sylvius, was indeed a militant Galenist, who resisted change and criticised Vesalius' work. But the confrontation that Servetus had with the medical faculty was not over the anatomy and function of the heart (as I show) but over his flirtation with astrology. I made this relatively minor substitution as an economical way of simultaneously bringing out Servetus' rebellious personality and the medical conservatism of the time.

I have occasionally changed the sequence of historical events to facilitate the storytelling. For example, Servetus had already published his first heretical book on the Trinity and was operating under his pseudonym by the time he was at the medical faculty in Paris. However, I have used his real name of Servetus for this period, since that is how he is known in medical history.

The meeting between Servetus, Calvin, Palmier and Vesalius in Paris is fictitious, although it does not violate the possibilities of history. All four of them were in Paris in the 1530s. Servetus and Vesalius were at the university. Calvin and Servetus were due to meet at this time in Paris, but Servetus apparently did not show up, probably because feared for his

safety. Palmier attended lectures Servetus gave on geography while in Paris. (Palmier was already an archbishop at this time, but I make his promotion later so that at this meeting he can be 'one of the boys'.) The purpose of the fictitious meeting is to introduce the two protagonists of this story as young men in a 'before-they-were-famous' clash.

The friendship between Servetus and Palmier would not have been as close as I portray, nor would Palmier have known about Servetus' earlier heretical life when he invited him to live in Vienne under his patronage. Also Servetus would not have told Palmier about his clandestine correspondence with Calvin or his writing the new heretical book, *The Restoration of Christianity*. However, it serves my drama if Palmier becomes privy to Servetus' secrets before they are disclosed by Calvin.

Servetus had an apartment in the archbishop's palace in Vienne, but I have him living away from town as a better context in which to show his quality as an outsider pursuing a double life. Marie and Anique are fictitious characters, who serve to develop Servetus' personality in a domestic setting. He was apparently a genial man in everyday relationships, a trait which contrasted, however, with the often fiery and abusive way in which he conducted ideological disputes, above all with Calvin. Calvin wrote to a friend: "He [Servetus] would not have been in danger of severe punishment if he had only conducted himself with moderation." Servetus had a boy servant in Vienne called Benoît Perrin, who did not however accompany him to Geneva.

Three letters were sent from Geneva to France with the purpose of (indirectly) informing the Catholic authorities of the true identity of the doctor known as Michel de Villeneuve in Vienne and of his authorship of the book, *The Restoration of Christianity*. I have edited the three letters into one and, for dramatic immediacy, portray Calvin dictating it. There is no evidence that Calvin actually dictated the letters, but the evidence implicating him in this collaboration with the Catholic Inquisition is overwhelming. The letter writer was a close associate and friend of Calvin. The letters enclosed the first pages of the newly printed book (including the title page and contents) which Servetus had just sent to Calvin, as well as incriminating handwritten letters sent by Servetus to Calvin some years before. Calvin had already stated that he would like to see Servetus dead. He also admitted responsibility for having Servetus arrested in Geneva, but denied involvement in his exposure in France, if in a somewhat ambiguous fashion. Nevertheless, Calvin's opponents at the time (including Servetus himself) certainly thought Calvin was responsible for the exposure to the Inquisition. And to imagine that he would have passed crucial documentation incriminating his long time opponent to someone without knowing the use to which the documentation would be put is to stretch plausibility to a breaking point.

The attendance of Servetus at a grand reception in Perrin's country mansion outside Geneva is fictitious and has the purpose of characterising the social base of Perrin's party, which was leading the opposition to Calvin at the time. The party had spearheaded the independence struggle of Geneva against Savoy and it represented the native gentry of the city. With their patriotic credentials, they could mobilise the poorer Genevese citizenry against the theocratic regime that Calvin was attempting to establish with the support of Huguenot immigrants and the burghers prospering on the trade in cloth and velvet.

The structure I use for the Genevan court trying Servetus is a device for representing the balance of Calvinist and Perrinist forces in the council at the time, a balance that would determine the trial's ultimate outcome. The judge is a fictitious character whose views reflect, as I see it, the evolution of majority thinking in the council that led in the end to Servetus' execution.

Guérault is an important character in the screenplay. He was a real person, a scholar and a poet. He was in Perrin's party in Geneva and fled the city for Vienne during a downturn in the

party's fortunes against Calvin. In Vienne he worked in the printing firm of his brother-in-law, Arnoullet, and oversaw the clandestine printing of *The Restoration of Christianity*. Guérout provides an extraordinary link between the French and Genevan ends of the Servetus story and I have taken the liberty of probably stretching his allegiances and role. I make him into more of an anti-Calvin activist among the Genevese poor than he is known to be. I did this as a device for identifying the potential of Servetus' free thinking Anabaptist ideology to fuel unrest in the city, a potential that arguably led the Geneva Council to consign Servetus to the stake. I like to think that Guérout would not have minded my exercise of poetic licence with his character. The screenplay is after all to honour the man who protected him from prosecution when, under interrogation, Servetus improbably maintained that Guérout had no knowledge of the heretical book he had been so obviously responsible for producing.

What's in the screenplay for me?

The extraordinary events of Servetus' life illuminate for me two enduring themes from history.

The first, and more obvious one, is the betrayal of a progressive movement by its leadership once it has achieved (or sometimes to achieve) power. In this instance we see betrayal of the principle of religious freedom by leaders of the official Reformation. History is strewn with other examples like the French and Russian Revolutions and, in our own times and on a much smaller stage, the capitulation of British New Labour to market ideology. I am happy if this screenplay reinforces recognition of this phenomenon. But I am not seeking to score a cheap 'holier-than-thou' point here. In the real world, action is always constrained by conflicting forces and compromises have to be made. This brings me to the story's second theme.

For me a key scene in the screenplay is when Guérout (fictitiously) visits Servetus in prison. Guérout asks Servetus to recant and save himself so he can help to fight the oppression that Calvin is imposing on the people of Geneva. When Servetus says he cannot do that, Guérout accuses him of self indulgence. That is really quite a rich accusation to level at someone facing execution for remaining true to his beliefs. But Guérout's point is that by Servetus choosing to stay pure inside he is sacrificing the wellbeing he could help to bring to many other people. Servetus tells Guérout that he cannot recant because if he could he would be another person. The purist and the activist are talking past each other on different wavelengths. The purist living in his inner realm cannot give ground even at the expense of the outside world. The activist living in that outside world doesn't want to know about inner feelings - he judges outcome by practical results. There is a universal tension here.

Lenin told the Bolsheviks they should remain firm in principle but be flexible in tactics. That is a good formula in theory, but the problem is that the identification of what is principle and what is tactics is a greasy pole. It is very easy to slide from tactical flexibility into a sell out. I have something of both the Servetus and the Guérout in me. I appreciate both their arguments, and the tension between them is unresolved in me and in the screenplay. This must be so because their arguments operate on different planes and are irresolvable: they are both right. How one tries to resolve this tension in practice is a matter of judgement in a particular circumstance.

But the Servetuses of this world provide us with something that the Guérouts do not. They furnish us with a moral reference point. They teach us about the inviolability of principle as a rectifying centre of gravity in a grafting, pragmatic world. Would I have written a screenplay 450 years after the event about a Guérout?

Sources and forms of names

I have used many sources in researching this screenplay but have relied in particular on two books: *Servetus and Calvin* by R. Willis, King & Co., London, 1877 and *Le Procès de Michel Servet a Vienne*, by P. Cavard, *Syndicat d'Initiative*, Vienne, 1953. The letters and the final condemnation that are read out in the screenplay are edited versions of the originals as quoted in these two sources.

I have used the original French names of most of the historical characters, although I have anglicised the given name of Guérout from Guillaume to William. For better known historical figures, I have employed the form of names by which they are most frequently known in English writings about them, namely, Latin for Michael Servetus, Andreas Vesalius and Jacobus Sylvius, and English for John Calvin.

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