

A Shrine to Calvin, Protestant Reformer

By Michael J. Ybarra

Geneva

When John Calvin died in Geneva in 1564, at age 54, he left instructions that he should be buried in a common grave, lest his tomb become a pilgrimage site, which is to say a place of idolatry, one of the great sins in Protestant theology.

Things didn't exactly go according to plan.

"The body was followed by the greater part of the city and by people of all ranks," noted Calvin's friend and biographer Theodore Beza.

Geneva has never exactly been a city of moderation. When the Reformation reached Geneva in the 1530s, the good citizens tore down the altarpiece in the St. Pierre Cathedral and fed communion wafers to dogs. Church attendance became mandatory; dancing was banned. Offenders were pilloried in front of the church after services; heretics burned at the stake. Calvin himself got booted from Geneva for a couple of years when he disobeyed an order from city authorities to stop excommunicating people with such zeal.

Somehow, though, Geneva became known as a city of refuge, which it was if you were a Protestant fleeing a Catholic state. Resident Catholics, on the other hand, had the generous choice of converting or moving.

I learned some of these tidbits of Geneva history while drinking a Calvin beer in a café around the corner from the St. Pierre Cathedral. I was reading Bernard Cottret's biography of Calvin, which I picked up at the new International Museum of the Reformation. Sad to say, I didn't learn as much at the museum itself.

The museum, which opened last year, is housed in a beautiful 18th-century building next to the cathedral, where Calvin preached for 30 years. The church itself is an unlovely mishmash of gothic and Romanesque accretions. From the front it looks like a bank; inside it feels like one, as stern and cheerless a place as even Calvin could have wished for. Its main point of interest is the wooden chair from which Calvin once delivered his sermons. The chair looks, not surprisingly, uncomfortable.

The museum, however, is overflowing with images and adornments, many—bizarrely—of Calvin himself. The preacher's gaunt, unsmiling face is the museum's icon, featured on coffee mugs and chocolate bars (not to mention beer bottles, which were a little strange to see in a



International Museum of the Reformation

At Geneva's International Museum of the Reformation, John Calvin's image is everywhere, including in Joseph Hornung's 1831 painting 'Calvin's Farewell.'

museum gift shop). A cutout figure of the fur-clad theologian minus face greets visitors in the courtyard in case you'd like to have your own face photographed above his body. Idolatry isn't what it used to be.

Although the museum bills itself as the first dedicated to the history of the Reformation, it's actually dedicated to the history of Calvinism, a term Calvin, of course, disliked. But for all its quirkiness, the museum does tell an interesting and sometimes engaging story about a profoundly influential strain of Christian thought—one preceded, perhaps even triggered, by a technological breakthrough: Gutenberg's invention of moveable type. When Gutenberg printed the first Bible in 1450 it was in Latin; in 1560 refugee scholars in Geneva translated the Bible into English. A 1562 edition of the so-called Geneva Bible (which predates the King James version) is one of the museum's treasures.

In 1517 Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on a church door, condemning the pope's practice of selling indulgences (sort of a reverse time-share plan to get out of purgatory early) and set off the Reformation. The vitriol of this schism is well illustrated in the museum's extensive display of cartoons, depicting, by turns, the pope as the Antichrist and Luther and Calvin being whipped by hell's furies. Drawings of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre horrifyingly show the real consequences of the split in Christendom. Other engravings portray recalcitrant converts being persuaded by gunpoint, roasted on spits, beheaded and impaled.

To Calvin there was a divine, if unknowable, purpose behind all this suffering. "He justly punishes and chastises us for our sins and faults," Calvin wrote after Geneva was besieged by the plague. "The punishments He sends to His servants are for their good and salvation," he wrote on another occasion—and tormented most of his life by, among other afflictions, gout, hemorrhoids and kidney stones, he knew of which he spoke.

Calvin was not a happy man—nor did he appear to want others to be happy, either. He ate and slept, as he did everything, sparingly. He married late and was widowed early. "In truth, out of fear that our marriage would be too happy, the Lord from the beginning moderated our joy," he said.

These days moderation seems to be out of fashion in Calvin's city. Geneva's Rue du Rhone is packed with swanky stores reveling in luxe, while strip clubs are more plentiful than churches. Crowds of Muslim women in headscarves spend ungodly sums on fancy coffee drinks at Starbucks.

After leaving the museum, I couldn't help thinking that Calvin might feel more at home in Saudi Arabia than in contemporary Geneva. Then I stopped at a convenience store on my way back to my hotel and tried to buy a beer. The clerk said it was impossible. It was after 9 p.m., she pointed out. Against the law.

Calvin, I think, would have approved.

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