

Article

Religious Publishing in 17th-Century Geneva

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Abstract: The objective of this article is to shed light on the history of the Reformation in 17th-century Geneva. The lens through which this study is conducted is that of religious publishing activity, which was significantly managed by the Company of Pastors and Professors. The role of the Company in religious publishing is inextricably linked to the unique status of the Church of Geneva within the broader context of the Reformation. The Company's institutional archives offer insight into the issues at stake in the printed book matters. This article focuses on the role of the Company in local censorship, which diminished over the period under study. The Company's censorship function enabled it to exert concrete influence on the global scale of Reformed publishing. This influence was the consequence of the Company's ecclesiastical and theological authority. This authority derived from the status of the Church of Geneva as the principal church and birthplace of the Reformation in the 16th century. An analysis of the metaphors signifying and symbolizing this role in the printed books themselves underlines the pre-eminence of the Church of Geneva in 17th-century Reformation.

Keywords: reformation; Geneva; company of pastors and professors; 17th century; religious publishing; censorship; communication networks

1. Introduction

The back cover of the recently published *Brill's Companion to the Reformation in Geneva* (Balserak 2021) states that the book “describes the course of the Protestant Reformation in the city of Geneva from the 16th to the 18th centuries.” In reality, out of the nineteen contributions, only one, by Jennifer Powell McNutt (2021), really engages, as its title suggests, with the two centuries following Jean Calvin's Geneva. Powell McNutt addresses the “resilience” of the Church of Geneva against the doctrinal, philosophical, and political attacks aimed at the later Reformation. Nevertheless, even this contribution does not fully engage with the next two centuries. The author is a specialist on the clergy of Geneva in the 18th century (Powell McNutt 2013). She briefly summarizes what happened during the “confessionalization in Post-Reformation Geneva” (Powell McNutt 2021, pp. 432–37), implicitly defining its chronology from around 1602 to 1605 (the failed attempt by Savoy to annex the city and Théodore de Bèze's death) to 1685 (the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes). Consequently, the *Companion* almost entirely neglects this period, which is reduced to some key events of the history of theology. This absence represents a significant historiographical hole, overlooking a substantial portion of the 17th century. Indeed, there are very few studies that address the religious history of Geneva in this period of transition.

In the same volume, the historical importance of Geneva in the development and dissemination of the Reformation in Europe over the course of the 16th century is highlighted by the contribution of Jameson Tucker (2021). As he demonstrates, the Geneva print industry and book trade, particularly during the years 1550–1565, were essential to the evangelization of France and other European territories, as a now well-established historiography has shown (Kingdon [1956] 2007; Gilmont 1981; Pettegree 2012; Walsby 2020). Tucker emphasizes the transnational dimensions of the phenomenon. At its peak, this print production was driven by French exiled publishers working in Geneva and was intended for exportation, as well as for the communities of refugees inside the city. As the author notes, Geneva publishing activity in the 16th century is probably one of the best-known



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and extensively discussed cases. Except for a few specific studies, the history of the Geneva print industry after 1600—the end date of the excellent and comprehensive bibliography built during his whole career by Jean-François [Gilmont](#) (2015)—remains comparatively unexplored.

This focus on the first Reformers and the central place devoted to Calvin is not surprising. It seems also logical that the publishing activities at that time have received major attention. This scholarship reflects the prevailing tendencies in the historiography, as reflected in a *Companion* aiming, like this one, to provide accurate state-of-the-art research. Obviously, the historical importance of the Reformation in Geneva is rooted in the 16th century, when the city became a distinctive and inspiring place shaped by its religious identity. This singularity gave rise to a specific reputation, be it called a myth ([Dufour \[1959\] 1966](#)) or seen as the center of a Christian commonwealth ([Roney and Klauber 1998](#)). To a religiously divided Europe, Geneva projected two faces: a truly Christian city and church or a city of debauchery and heresy, depending on the religious allegiance of the observer. The spectacular rise of the city's printing industry contributed to the development of this religious reputation, with printed books serving as a conduit for the dissemination of both positive and negative perceptions of the city ([Higman 1998](#)).

The legacy of this multifaceted image and reputation beyond its formative decades has not been thoroughly explored. Such research must address the period when Geneva was no longer the singular Reformed center it had been in the 16th century. The Calvin-centered studies on the Reformation in Geneva have obscured what transpired before and after him. The aim of this paper is to shed some light on the decades during which the Church of Geneva, founded by Calvin, had to reshape its position within a plurality of Reformed centers. How in the 17th century was the perception of Geneva among the other Reformed communities impacted by the city's history as the birthplace of Calvinian Reformation? To what extent has this earlier primacy remained relevant within the international Reformed networks? How was the image of the city shaped, and to what ends was it used?

In this essay, I will address these questions by focusing on the religious book production in Geneva during the 17th century until the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. My objective is to examine the relationship between this religious publishing activity and the image of the city. The specific reputation of Geneva that grew during the midst years of the 16th century left a symbolic legacy that must be interrogated. Geneva publishing activity, primarily intended for exportation, was largely overseen by the Company of Pastors and Professors. The Company was the head of the Church of Geneva and was composed of all the pastors and professors of the city. Its role in the 17th century did not diverge much from the one it assumed at its founding; it continued to oversee ecclesiastical matters, discuss theological issues, and to be responsible for teaching and charity ([Stauffenegger 1983](#); [Manetsch 2021](#)). An examination of the publishing activity managed by the Church of Geneva offers a helpful insight into the questions raised above. Indeed, religious books displaying the Geneva imprint on their title page contributed to the reputation of the city. Furthermore, this publishing activity took place in contact, collaboration, and communication with theologians and churches across Reformed Europe, principally in France.

A systematic examination of the Company's weekly gathering records for the period studied shows numerous references to matters regarding to the printed book. These references reveal the practical roles performed by the Company in Geneva's publishing activity and the fact that this activity took place within the broader context of Reformed publishing. Close examination sheds light on the representations of these roles. The Company's archives indeed reveal a clear self-awareness of a particular status within the international Reformed world. Images built to signify such status were rooted in the religious reputation of Geneva, and they were elaborated in the printed books themselves, which acted as repositories and vehicles for their dissemination.

The following pages concentrate first on the functions of the Company in relation to control of local book production. The second section will address the practical role

of the Company in international Reformed publishing. The final section of this article will specifically interrogate the representations derived from these roles by analyzing the metaphors used to depict the Church of Geneva. On a methodological level, it seems particularly relevant to study both the actual functions of the Church of Geneva and their representations, as expressed by both the Company itself and foreign observers. Specifically applied to religious book production, this approach allows us to understand the perception and image of Geneva and its church during the transitory period from the age of confessions to the pre-Enlightenment. We are thus able to consider the continuities and changes in the status of Geneva in the Reformed world after the Reformation.

2. The Company of Pastors and Professors and Book Control in Geneva: A Gradual Exclusion

At the local level, the Company was part of the institutional framework regulating the print industry in Geneva. This role enabled it to maintain some control over the religious book production. In exploring the modalities of this role, we can see how a local censorship shaped the international production of Reformed books and contributed to the specific reputation of the Genevan church. The involvement of a religious institution in censorship was common and derived from the ecclesiastical implications of book control on a global scale from its origins in the 16th century (Infelise 2007). The Company's prerogatives diminished gradually between the 16th and 17th centuries. Such a restriction of the influence exerted by the religious institution profited the State authorities in Geneva, as was the case generally in other parts of Europe, such as in France (Quantin 2015) and Venice (Infelise 2014). This section is devoted to the evolution of the practical influence exerted locally by the Company on Geneva religious book production and of the relationships between the Company and the Council. These developments must be studied because they had consequences for the international role of the Company within wider Reformed publishing.

In Geneva, since Calvin, the Company had taken an important part in the shaping of the ordinances regulating print. Its practical role and legal prerogatives have been well studied for the 16th century (Cartier 1893; Chaix 1954; Gilmont 1997; Jostock 2007). However, the subsequent period has drawn little attention (Santschi 1978). The formalization of the legislation occurred between 1560, the issuing of the first ordinances over printing, and 1625, the year of their last revision. This phase was characterized by a certain plasticity of the regulation, redefined from one censorship issue to the next (Jostock 2007). This first phase was followed by a period of legal stability, marked by evolutions in the practice of censorship, leading de facto to the sidelining of the Company from control over book production around the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

Despite a handful of earlier measures, the main legal framework regulating the Geneva printing industry was issued in 1560. This year marked the peak of religious book production aimed at the evangelization of France, following the creation of the Academy in 1559. The Geneva model, and its myth, were taking shape, and it became a necessity to regulate the industry responsible for their diffusion. Explicitly, the text of the ordinances stated that their purpose was to “avoid many things that are done to the great blame of the gospel and dishonor of the city”.¹ From the beginning, a close relationship was established between the reputation of the Genevan church and its religious book production. The Company was thus heavily involved in the control of print, and its permission, as well as the Council's, was necessary to print any book. In 1582, however, this requirement was restricted to the books dealing with religion, and the Company lost its right of preventive examination of the overall book production. In spite of this restriction, the Company maintained some influence even if it was no longer, as an institution, taking part in the general process of granting permission to print. Indeed, since the ordinances of 1560, a commission had been created to oversee the print world. Its composition was detailed in 1580 and consisted of two magistrates and the rector of the Academy, himself member of the Company.

This commission witnessed a slow and constant diminishing of its activities, as its prerogatives were progressively absorbed by the scholarchs. The position of scholarch,

created in 1581, was held by eminent members of the Small Council, appointed for life. They were involved in the governance of the College and the Academy and more and more in the print industry and book trade (Jostock 2007, pp. 44–46; Maag 1995, pp. 51–52). In 1614–15, the transition from the early commission to the scholars appeared complete and was confirmed in the last revision of the ordinances of 1625. From that year onwards, the legal regulation of book production granted no prerogative to the Company, which was definitively excluded from control of theoretical printed book production, except for the preventive examination of religious publications.

This did not mean that the pastors and professors were not taking part in actual and practical control. During the first two-thirds of the century at least, a seemingly fruitful collaboration between the rector and the scholars arose. The former was in charge of the usual “visitation” of the workshops and bookshops, which gave him crucial information about what was being produced and sold. On the behalf of his colleagues, the rector regularly addressed the Council to request the intervention of the secular arm in order to prohibit the printing or selling of books the Company would condemn. Such a referral often ended to the advantage of the Company. In 1625, for example, a bookseller selling Catholic devotional books was prosecuted, and his commerce closed.² In 1640, the rector successfully persuaded the Council to revoke the privilege it had granted to a book containing propositions “very injurious to our religion”.³ On some occasions, on the contrary, such requests were considered irrelevant by the Council, as it held the final and sole coercive power to prohibit a publication and prosecute those responsible for it. Such was the case in 1647, when the rector was turned down “against his will” by the scholars, to whom he had requested the suppression of a book judged harmful by the Company.⁴

Despite a few instances of the sort, and even if the Company was put out of the legislation, the overall application of control over book production seemed to be managed at the satisfaction of both the political and the ecclesiastical authorities. In practice, the rector was the first authority of censorship, on account of his task of visiting the workshops. Whenever he found a work being printed that he and his colleagues the pastors and professors deemed inappropriate, he asked the publisher directly for its suppression. If the latter did not cooperate, the rector would refer the matter to the scholars.

The right of preventive examination of religious books granted to the Company would theoretically render other means of control useless. Nonetheless, it is necessary to consider the involvement of the Company in the control of the overall book production, not only religious-book production, to understand the development that occurred during the years 1660s to 1680s. This period saw the end of the early relative alignment of the pastors’ and the Council’s objectives. Already sidelined from the legal regulation since the 1620s, the Company was progressively removed from the practical control over book production. Moreover, even the supervision of religious publications, which was theoretically still in its hands, was undermined. The Council’s evident lack of support toward the Company led publishers to ignore the latter’s protests. A multiplication of complaints by the Company regarding the lack of respect for the authority of the rector is evident from its registers. The publishers were increasingly reluctant to submit to the rector’s customary practice of visiting the workshops as well as to his right to examine religious books before they were printed.⁵ In 1686, the newly elected rector, Michel Turretini, asked his colleagues “if he has the right to enter the printing workshops to see what is being printed”.⁶ The answer was negative. This refusal marked the end of a process that had begun decades before. Without the information provided by close contact with the milieu, the Company was thus unable to take action—even unofficially—in control over publishing activity. The pastors and professors somehow had to acknowledge the redefinition of their role as well as their restriction from the local administration of book censorship. Two years later, a complaint was made by the Company about “the refusal of the publishers to allow the rector to inspect their books, which is absolutely against the right of his office.”⁷ The divergence between the legal and practical functions of the rector was inverted compared to the situation of the 1620s to the 1660s. At that time, the rector had exerted a concrete and efficient control over

book production, in collaboration with the secular power, despite being legally mandated to do so. From the 1660s, however, even if the rector was theoretically responsible for the preventive examination of the religious books, this “right of his office” was denied by the publishers.

The Revocation thus marked the end of a period going back to the first ordinances regarding print in Geneva, during which the pastors could control the reputation of the city as disseminated by its books. In fact, the primary link between the religious books produced in Geneva and the image of the city and of its church was the participation of the Company in the local publishing activity. In principle, through the censorship process, religious books produced in Geneva and bearing its imprint were approved and validated by the Company, at least tacitly. Religious books printed in the city represented the Genevan church abroad.

3. Expertise, Authority, and Facilities in International Reformed Publishing

In her monograph on Geneva book control between 1560 and 1625, Ingeborg Jostock (2007, pp. 221–54) dedicates a chapter to the practical functions exerted by the Company as the head of the “center of the Reformed world”, regarding the printed book. She stresses the international nature of this relationship and its interconnected functioning. Jostock convincingly describes how, during the first two decades of the 17th century, Geneva strengthened its status as an essential reference for the French churches newly institutionalized after the Edict of Nantes. The Company of Pastors and Professors of Geneva provided men and books for the Reformed communities in France and elsewhere. As for the provision of men, many pastors within the Reformed churches around Europe were trained at the Academy of Geneva (Maag 1995; Goeing 2021) or directly sent by the Company. The provision of books has been considerably less examined, although Jostock offers a first impression.

The Company was above all responsible for the publication of essential works for the Reformed faith and worship, such as Bibles, catechisms, and Psalms. Secondly, foreign authors—mostly Reformed theologians—addressed the Company seeking its theological expertise, editorial competencies, and technical facilities. Indeed, the Company was able to assess the doctrine of the manuscripts it received, exerting influence on Reformed publishing as a whole. Its advice could impact the content of the books, sometimes even leading to the banning of a publication deemed insufficient or bad. If considered good and fruitful enough to “see the light”, some texts could be revised and corrected by the pastors and professors. Jostock provides examples of authors from France, Swiss Confederacy, Imperial lands or United Provinces seeking the Company’s advice and receiving its corrections. The Company could also act as publisher or agent between the authors and local printers, promoting the works of its own members or the manuscripts it had received. Jostock entitles her chapter “the stamp of orthodoxy”. The expertise of the Company—and most importantly—the fact that this expertise was recognized and sought after conferred it a status of authority in matters regarding the printing and publishing of religious books. This recognition and authority were a direct legacy of the leading status of Calvin’s and de Bèze’s Geneva from the previous century. As the repository of the legacy of the great Reformers, the Company, the very same institution they had created and directed for years, was the guardian of orthodoxy.

This situation was even more relevant during the period following that examined in Jostock’s book. The registers show an increase in the solicitations made to the Company by foreign authors to publish their books. The Genevan participation in the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619) contributed to this tendency. The Synod was called to solve the issues raised by the Arminianism and was of major importance internationally in the formalization of the orthodoxy within the Reformation (Goudriaan and Van Lieburg 2011). Jean Diodati and Theodore Tronchin, the theologians deputized from Geneva, advocated for a defense of the orthodoxy and reassessed the legacy of the Geneva of Calvin and de Bèze (Fornerod 2012). After 1620, the Company’s status as guardian of orthodoxy was reinforced.

Secondly, the sources reveal a multiplication of the discussions on printed confessional controversies from the 1620s onward. Studies of the Catholic–Protestant controversy during the coexistence resulting from the Edict of Nantes (Dompnier 1985, 2002; Solé 1997; Kappler 2011) emphasize the proliferation of books during the first three decades, as shown by Louis Desgraves’ bibliographical study (Desgraves 1984–1985). The general narrative sees the pursuit of the wars of religion in the field of printed publication, where champions of both confessional sides clashed through their books. Even if the biconfessional realm of France was the designated battlefield, the printed arena was closely observed and fueled by theologians across Europe. The latest publications on the subject tend to nuance this narrative by shifting the analysis to lesser-known, “despised” forms of controversy (Léonard 2023). Adjustments might also be made to the general model by focusing on part of the overall corpus, targeting a specific group—such as the Jesuits (Henryot 2019)—or a particular place. As the analysis of the data gathered by Desgraves reveals, the participation of the Geneva presses rose precisely during the 1620s and the 1630s, when the overall production tended to decrease. The peak of this tendency came in 1638: out of the 37 books of controversy issued that year by both confessions, 10 came from Geneva (Desgraves 1984–1985, vol. 2, pp. 64–68).

Geneva’s printed production of controversial books followed a trend contrary to the general one. The mere fact that the city was outside the jurisdiction of the French authorities provides a first explanation. As the royal power aimed its first attacks against Protestant rights during the 1620s, the publication of Reformed books became more difficult; some of the most unacceptable texts in the eyes of the French crown were sent abroad to be printed. In 1627, for instance, the Grenoble minister Denis Bouteroue had published a controversial book, the *Response des bons anges aux voix angéliques des mauvais* (Haag and Haag 1881), in which he wrote that “the Roman Church approves the parricide of Kings”. For this, the book was condemned and “publicly burned” by decree from the Parlement. The Grenoble Colloque sent another pastor, Pierre Piffard, to Geneva in order to give the Company the “apology” written by Bouteroue in response to the condemnation of his book and to ask the Genevans to “carefully revise” it.⁸

The politico-religious question discussed here was strongly activated in the French context following the assassination of Henry IV in 1610. The Jesuits were blamed for the regicide: the debate quickly entered the publishing arena, and many Jesuits and other Catholics treatises came under scrutiny in the search for doctrinal positions legitimating the “tyrannicide”, read as “regicide”. This idea was absolutely unacceptable for Gallicans as well as Protestants. Protestants were keen to seize the controversy to attack the Jesuits’, and the Roman’s positions on this matter relating to the crucial questions of the pope’s temporal authority and sovereignty (De Franceschi 2009; Gabriel 2010). In 1627, the heated controversies that had contributed to the “theologico-political crisis” of early-17th-century Catholicism were ended by a rapprochement between the French royal power and the Roman curia (De Franceschi 2009, pp. 525–695). Bouteroue’s book was thus perceived as a means of reactivating a fight precisely when appeasement was sought. It is in this context that we must place the Parlement’s condemnation of the book.

The Company gave the requested advice and suggested that, instead of having the apology written by Bouteroue, “it would be more useful to simply gather a mass of supporting documents” proving his point.⁹ Bouteroue answered a few weeks later with a letter, asking the Company to work on the task, in order to issue a book consisting of a “collection of passages showing that the popes approved the attacks made against kings”.¹⁰ The prominent theologian Benedict Turretini was handed the materials gathered by Bouteroue and given the task of writing the book. We read in a fierce letter addressed by Bouteroue to the Genevan pastor Theodore Tronchin in July 1627 that hesitation among the members of the Company had delayed the publication. Bouteroue harshly highlighted to his correspondent that the book was “awaited by everyone”, that some “excellent people” found the project to be good, and he claimed that hiding the evilness of the Roman doctrine would only be to its advantage. On the contrary, he argued that exposing it would bring

healing, because “an open wound is relieved of its pus and dirt”.¹¹ We are unable to trace the discussions amongst the members of the Company, but the book was eventually published the same year without the name of Turretini.¹²

Bouteroue’s publication project, initiated in Grenoble, was moved to Geneva to benefit from printing presses situated outside of the French jurisdiction. The city was a free place with practical facilities for printing, but it was also a center for the defense of the Reformed faith fully able to issue controversial books. The fact that Bouteroue and his Colloque gave up the work on the apology and asked Turretini to take over is revealing. The Dauphiné pastors sought the expertise of a learned scholar for an extremely specialized work. The *Recueil* (Turretini 1627) was indeed full of quotations from a colossal amount of Catholic writings, and its author demonstrated an extremely accurate knowledge of this broad corpus issued by his adversaries. This example highlights the collaborative nature of the controversial communication issued by Reformed churches and the central role held by the Company.

However, matters relating to the publishing of controversial books seem to disappear from the Company’s registers after the 1660s. In fact, the decline, stressed in the previous section, of the relations between the Company and the Council at that time, resulting in the decrease of the Company’s practical authority in book censorship, was a significant factor. In 1661, the pastors received a complaint from some of the magistrates about the publication in the city of books, sent by foreign authors to be printed in Geneva, taking part in the confessional controversy. The councilors did not approve of “certain sharp terms contained therein, and would like them to be softened.” The problem was that “the pope is represented as the Antichrist, the cardinals, bishops, etc. as his servants.” For the first time, we read in the Geneva institutional registers a reluctance towards “the papistic doctrine or religion being called the doctrine of devils”.¹³ The depiction of the pope as the Antichrist was not a small issue only related to the polemical vocabulary of the language used in the publications of controversy. In fact, this association had existed since 1603 in the very articles of the confession of faith of the French churches. The Edict of Nantes guaranteed the respect of the confession of faith and the lawfulness for the Huguenots to believe and profess its articles (Solfaroli Camillocci 2011). The rejection by some councilors of an idea heavily deployed for more than a century in the polemical religious books produced in Geneva, and at the same time an article of the faith, was of great significance. A definitive rift between the interests of the political and ecclesiastical authorities was taking shape. From that period onwards, diplomatic considerations prevailed over religious ones. Indeed, the reason for condemning the comparison of the pope to the Antichrist was the growing pressure of French influence over Geneva, specifically over its censorship policies. The Council, since the 1660s, was concentrating its efforts on control of book production with the goal of stopping anything that could displease Louis XIV’s government. To qualify the spiritual authority recognized by the Most Christian King as Antichrist and to call “religion of the devils” the faith and doctrine followed in the Kingdom was no longer acceptable. The results were that works were either clandestinely printed in Geneva or decisively prohibited if too anti-French, particularly at the time and following the Revocation.

Up until that point, jurisdictional liberty, practical facilities, as well as theological and scholarly expertise were some of the reasons why foreign theologians addressed the Company to publish their works in Geneva. In addition, the symbolic importance of publishing Reformed books in Geneva was no less appealing to those who wrote to the Company, as is stressed the following pages. The implicit approval of the church resulting from the censorship process and the practical participation of the Company were actively sought. Such validation from a recognized authority arose from—and contributed to—Geneva’s reputation of pre-eminence within the Reformation.

4. “Sacred Torch” and “Mother Church”: Symbols of Geneva’s Primacy

The reputation of Geneva was expressed through different metaphors closely related to its publishing activity and which highlighted the status of its church amongst the other

Reformed churches. These metaphors were given consistency by the services rendered by the Company in the field of religious publishing, but most of all, they emphasized the original roots of the Church of Geneva. The activities of the Company in the 17th century were thus perceived to be closely connected with its history and identity. To investigate these questions, it seems particularly fruitful to observe the shaping of this Genevan reputation in the books printed.

An elaborate example is found in 1655 with the famous polemist and Parisian pastor Charles Drelincourt (McKee 2014). He dedicated his controversial treatise printed in Geneva, *Neuf Dialogues contre les missionnaires*, to the magistrates of the city (Drelincourt 1655, sigs. ¶2-¶¶6v). In this long epistle, Drelincourt started by depicting an idealized and topical image of Geneva, emphasizing its election by God, who “lighted [there] the sacred torch that now lights up a vast part of the Universe.” (*Ibid.*, sig. ¶2) God, then, wanted “this light [to shine] everywhere, and [spread] its ray to the ends of the earth.” (*Ibid.*, sig. ¶4) Geneva was seen as the originating place of the Reformation, acting as a sun, a beacon, a chandelier, a sacred fire illuminating the world, in variations all deriving from the biblical image of the lamp in Mat. 5:15. This light was “throwing sparks that flew everywhere and kindled holy flames.” (*Ibid.*, sig. ¶7v) These sparks and rays were later explained, when Geneva was compared with an “arsenal”. They were the “spiritual weapons” constituted by the voices of the “true Pastors and faithful Ministers of the Holy Gospel” trained and instructed at the Academy and by their “erudite and pious writings”, disseminated by the obvious means of printed publication. (*Ibid.*, sig. ¶¶v) After recalling the history of the Reformation in Geneva, Drelincourt linked it to his personal and familial history. He finally stressed his long-lasting publishing history with Geneva, after having received from the Council “all the privileges [he] ha[s] asked now and then for the printing of [his] books”. The text ended with his own strong (“very-ardent”) and lifelong affection and respect for Geneva. By so doing, Drelincourt designated himself as one of the “flames” lighted by the “sparks” issued from Geneva. His book, then, became one of the fires derived from the first one, and at the same time, one of the sparks, one of the “weapons”, i.e., one of the “writings” published in Geneva.

In fact, the whole epistle is constructed around the prominent status of the Church of Geneva, rooted in the religious history of the city as a birthplace of Reformation. It was of course usual practice, expected in a dedicatory preface, to praise the Geneva magistrates. Moreover, it was tactical sense to enhance the status of the book as a direct emanation of the Geneva religious authority. Even better, Drelincourt stressed that not only this book but also numerous others he had written were published in Geneva. Several were his works that contributed to the spreading of the fire.

The religious biblical representation of Geneva as a source of light was by no means original, but its revival in the middle of the 17th century indicated the permanence of a status acquired a hundred years earlier. As Drelincourt himself recalled (*Ibid.*, sig. ¶3), the former device of the city, post tenebras spero lucem (Job, 17:12), was changed after the Reformation in the late 1530s, becoming post tenebras lux. The emblem of the sun surmounting the city’s coat of arms and the new device has, since then, been showing the light of the Reformation and visually depicting the metaphor of Geneva as a source of light, in a well-known and widespread symbol (Deonna 1946). Furthermore, Drelincourt was not the only one using this kind of metaphor for a book produced in the city, which in his case, was a quite short and accessible controversial book aimed at a large public. One other example is particularly significant for the mixture of this depiction of Geneva as a beacon with another image extremely widespread.

This second image is to be found in a thick book of theology written by the Geneva pastor Jean Gros and published in the city in 1642 (re-issued with new title pages in 1661 and 1663). It was an exegesis of the Book of Revelation.¹⁴ In January 1641, Gros had requested a privilege for his work, which was granted by the Council upon the approbation of the rector and the professors of theology.¹⁵ Amongst other elements of paratext, the book contains a dedicatory epistle to the magistrates and pastors of Geneva (Gros 1642,

sigs. *-2v). In this dedication, Gros justified the publication of his book as a necessary interpretation of the prophecies contained in the Apocalypse, by placing himself in the line of “excellent people that God, in ancient times and mostly in our own, has raised up as bright Suns”. Gros depicted his work as “this little spark [he] add[s] to their clear rays” (*Ibid.*, sig. *2), being inspired to do so by the Lord. Here again, before Drelincourt, we observe a book printed in Geneva written by a member of the Company, self-described as a spark issued from the sun and aimed at enlightening its readers. A few lines later, Gros addressed his work to the magistrates and to his “brothers” the pastors, highlighting that they were like “the Lords Magistrates and Pastors of a second Asia Minor, the nurturing mother of several particular Churches that are closely related to the seven Asiatics to whom this apocalypse was written”. Granting the status of the nurturing mother of the Seven Churches to Geneva was significant, as the Seven Churches of Asia commonly represented the first Christian communities. Geneva was therefore compared to John of Patmos writing letters directly inspired by God to the churches. Indeed, Gros continued by stating that “the good odour” of the name of Geneva–Asia Minor was such that some were, by it, “confirmed and attracted to the obedience to the Gospel”. The metaphors were combined: the “name” of Geneva could lead to conversions to the true faith. It was a means to spread Geneva’s reputation of a “Mother Church”, capable of nourishing and enlightening others through the dissemination of “sparks” (books) issued from the “sun” embodied by Genevan theologians. The biblical analogy gave the Genevan church a position of origin and of source, reinforced by the “Mother Church” metaphor, which needs a more thorough explanation.

At the very end of the time period considered in this paper, the motherly metaphor was used by the members of the Company themselves. In 1693, a delegation of pastors appeared before the Council and delivered a speech about the revision of the Psalter.¹⁶ They argued that the purpose of this revision was to modernize the language that had evolved greatly since the time of Marot and de Bèze, who had translated to French and put into verse the Psalms in the middle of the 16th century (Marot and de Bèze [1562] 2019; [Candaux 1986](#)). The reason for the revision of this obsolete language was that “the enemies of our holy Religion often took occasion and pretext to undermine it, and to mock the worship which we render to the Divinity in our Temples.” A majority of the Company was calling “to have [the revised Psalms] printed, with the approbation, in the title, of the Pastors and Professors of this Church and Academy.” A certain Mr. Caze generously offered to fund the printing of a thousand copies of the Psalter if the Council gave its permission. The speech ended by stressing that such a change needed the approbation of the Council, as “the honour and the reputation of this Church is very much involved, in that it is considered to be the principal and nurturer mother of the Reformed Churches.”¹⁷ The ecclesiological notion of the church as mother and nurturer was rooted in biblical motives. It was—and is still—of central importance to designate the relationship between the church and the communitarian body of believers. The metaphor was then not a mere image, but the symbol of a performative model of ecclesiology ([Solfaroli Camillocci 2022](#)). The very concrete and tangible food provided by this “nurturing mother” to her children—the churches—was thought to be the copies of the revised edition of the Psalter. It is important to underline that the Psalter, since its formalization in 1562, was often accompanied in its printed editions by various foundational devotional and liturgical texts, referred to in the sources as “books of piety”: catechism, confession of faith, prayers, and even the Bible ([Candaux 1986](#); [Jostock 2007](#)). The origin of this “food” was meant to be explicitly mentioned on the title page, indicating the approbation of the pastors and professors of Geneva.

The very same occurrence in the sources is commented on by [Powell McNutt \(2013, pp. 25–67\)](#), who dedicates a full chapter to the “Mother Church” metaphor. She cites the archive from a restricted quotation by Olivier Fatio and Louise Martin-van Berchem ([Fatio and Martin 1985, pp. 309–10](#)). Furthermore, Powell McNutt identifies the analogy in the letters sent by foreign churches to Geneva after the final adoption of the revised Psalter in 1698. However, because of the truncated quote from 1693, she misses the tight association

of the printed books issued by the Geneva presses as explicit food provided by the “Mother Church”. The religious books produced and distributed by the Church of Geneva were indeed an essential component of the analogy. Powell McNutt analyses the Revocation as a rupture causing the revival of the 16th century motherly metaphor. Rather, interpreting the metaphor through Geneva’s publishing history shows a continuity of the fundamental influence exerted by the Company on the international Reformed communities by the means of religious book production.

The pastors had a highly accurate understanding of their role, as we find in an even clearer occurrence of the motherly metaphor. In 1686, a diplomatic and commercial conflict arose between the Company and the authorities of Bern, because the latter had granted a privilege to one of their subjects, the printer Gabriel Thormann, to publish “books of piety”. The privilege granted a monopoly, implying that the Geneva production was prohibited from sales in Bernese territory. The problem, according to the Company registers, was that such a monopoly would be “against the freedom of trade, and even against the honor of this Church and Academy [of Geneva], which have always been considered as the source and the mother of these printed books and translations of the sacred books.”¹⁸ In this case, the Genevan church was depicted, as in the previous example, as the origin and “source” of the printed books of piety. In addition, it had “always” been their mother. This example shows a variation in the metaphor. The books of piety were considered as the children of the Genevan church. In the previous case, they were the food given by the Genevan Mother Church to the other Reformed churches, depicted as her children. In both cases, however, we can observe that, at the end of the 17th century, the Company of Pastors considered that the books of piety were specifically Genevan products. These products were of a dual nature, both physical and spiritual. The “printed books” were objects and merchant goods, and their contents were the French “translations” of the Word of God. They were the necessary supports of faith, issued by a religious authority whose specific status of pre-eminence was rooted in its history. Indeed, since the time of the Reformation, the Company of Pastors and Professors of Geneva, created by Calvin and lead by de Bèze after him, was a recognized institution holding the authority over the French translation of the Scriptures. The 1562 version of the Psalms completed by de Bèze was not modified until 1698, and the 1588 version of the French Geneva Bible remained the most-used and widespread version in francophone Reformed communities for the whole of the 17th century (Chambers 1994, pp. v–x). It was only revised in 1744 by the Neuchâtel theologian Jean-Frédéric Ostervald.

These two important and widespread images designating the relationship between Geneva and other Reformed communities were not only metaphors but also performative symbols. Rooted in biblical references commonly shared, they acted as means to depict and strongly reinforce the primacy of Geneva. The city had a pre-eminence that was notably manifested in the functions of the Company regarding religious books. Geneva was a source of light on account of its own Reformation and the consolidation of Calvin’s model of a Christian society. During the 17th century, the city was still the torch from which books of controversy, theological treatises, and other works by Reformed theologians were sent as sparks capable of lighting new flames. In addition to this role, Geneva, the first and the “principal”, was still considered a Mother Church, holding responsibility over the very text of the Word and issuing its various expressions through printed books of piety on which the Reformed fed. Both these images depicted a kind of religious network in which the Church of Geneva was held in particular esteem for its history and identity. The reputation derived from this history and identity was therefore the reason why effective services were provided. These services, by turn, contributed to reinforcing and legitimizing such a reputation. However, it must be remembered that these metaphors highlighting the pre-eminence of Geneva within the Reformed world—and notably in regards to the production of religious books—were sustained by the very books themselves. Authors and publishers had every interest to display a high regard for the motherly or enlightened city of publication, as their books directly benefited from it. Geneva’s reputation acted as

a form of approval and of credit granted to the works published in such a pre-eminent doctrinal, ecclesiastical, and theological center.

Geneva's religious publishing in the 17th century could be considered as the stamp of orthodoxy by a Reformed public. It could equally be perceived by a public of a different confession—above all Catholic—as a proof of error, heresy, depravation, and even danger. Roman censorship feared the potential contamination spread by books produced by “those devils in Geneva” well into the 17th century (Savelli 2011, pp. 315–44). This is one of the reasons why a vast proportion of the overall books published in the city, and mostly those that had nothing to do with religion, were gradually printed under false or fictitious imprints.

5. Conclusions

Several observations can be drawn from the issues addressed in this essay. Overall, the history of the Reformation in Geneva would benefit from a broadening of its intense focus on Calvin. Too often, our understanding of certain topics remains dependent on unquestioned narratives. Such is the case of the position of the Genevan church within the international Reformed world after the Reformation. It is crucial for the history of Geneva, but above all for the history of the Reformation, to understand how the networks between the different Reformed churches and intellectual centers were constructed in the decades following the process of confessional establishment and consolidation. Indeed, within those networks, the status of Geneva, as the source of the Calvinist Reformation, was complex. The religious message and model spread and diffused through books printed in the city in the middle of the 16th century gave birth to several churches. These offspring communities formed, developed, and adapted to national circumstances at the theological and ecclesiastical as well as the organizational, political, and societal levels. It would be absurd to consider all Reformed churches of the 17th century as a single and uniform group of believers. Nevertheless, they shared in common a part of their identity: their affiliation to Geneva as a “Mother Church” or a “beacon of light”.

The historiography has mostly focused on the paradigm of the “Reformation and the Book” (Gilmont 1998; Pettegree 2015), looking for the relationship between printed books and the spreading of the new faith during the first century of the Reformation. Books were still of essential significance at a time when confessional borders were much clearer and doctrinal messages were much more formalized. Religious books, used for piety, theological discussion, and doctrinal exposition of orthodoxy or for confessional confrontation, were obviously central in 17th-century Reformation, as in other religions. As such, Geneva's religious publishing, at least until the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, was of considerable significance in maintaining a status of pre-eminence. Through books, and in the books, images of the city were disseminated within the Reformed world.

Regarding this question, the links between the three sections of this article must be drawn together once more. Local censorship granted the Company the necessary practical influence to nurture the idea that the religious books were produced in Geneva by its church. As a result, the Company was able to act as an authority and expert in the broader field of Reformed publishing. This effective authority, in a dual process, derived from and contributed to Geneva's unique status, in turn disseminated in the books and elsewhere through a reputation of pre-eminence sustained and performed by biblical metaphors acting as powerful symbols.

However, the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes marked a turning point in this general dynamic. The Company was ultimately sidelined from practical censorship and silenced in the field of controversy. The pursuit of the investigation on religious publishing in Geneva for the following period would help shed light on the consequences of the Revocation and on a later part of the history of the Reformation.

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Notes

- ¹ AEG, R.C. 56, 13 February 1560, f. 7v, quoted from Jostock (2007, p. 326): “Et pour obvier à tant de choses qui se commettent au grand blâme de l’Evangile et deshonneur de la Ville [...]”
- ² AEG, Cp. Past. R 8, 15 July 1625, p. 12: “Monsieur le recteur parlera à lui serieusement, le tansera de ce trafic indigne, et le lui defendra pour l’advenir, que s’il n’acquiesce à ces remonstrances, Messieurs les scholarques en soyent advertis.” The selling of catholic books is one of the articles of the accusations towards this bookseller, Raymond Rovi re. The file reference for his prosecution is AEG, P.C. 2756.
- ³ AEG, R.C. 139, 22 April 1640, f. 59v: “Les sieurs freres Chouet, fils du sieur Pierre Chouet ont commenc  d’imprimer une histoire de Davila, italien de nation, espagnol de faction, qui contient divers narrez tr s injurieux   nostre religion et   ceste ville et   la memoire des deffuncts spectables Calvin et De Beze [...]”
- ⁴ AEG, Cp. Past. R 9, 14 May 1647, p. 132: “Propos  qu’on avoit ici imprim  un certain livre, auquel il y avoit beaucoup de choses entierement indignes, comme de mettre en un mesme tableau Calvin, Beze et Belial, et autres choses, comme ce qu’il parle desavantageusement contre le Parlement d’Angleterre. Sur ce, nostre frere Monsieur Morus, recteur, a protest  que ce livre avoit est  imprim  contre sa volont , car en ayant est  parl  en parl  en la compagnie de Messieurs les scholarques, il s’y estoit oppos  de son possible mais le plus grand avis l’avoit emport  par dessus lui.”
- ⁵ For example, see AEG, Cp. Past. R 11, 15 June 1660, p. 128: “Represent  [...] que les imprimeurs de ce lieu impriment plusieurs pieces sans permission, s’il seroit point expedient de leur defendre de ne rien mettre soubz la presse que par ordre de ceste Compagnie. Adviz  de [...] prier Messieurs les scholarques d’y interposer leur autorit  pour pr venir les abus. De quoy a est  charg  Monsieur le recteur.”; AEG, Cp. Past. R 12, 11 March 1670, p. 502: the Rector “a fait savoir   tous les Maitres imprimeurs qu’ils n’ayent   imprimer aucun livre que premierement il n’ait est  veu et examin  selon les ordres”; *Ibid.*, 20 January 1671, p. 586: “a est  fait plainte que, contre les ordres, plusieurs livres s’impriment sans que Monsieur le recteur les ait veus”; AEG, Cp. Past. R 14, 17 november 1682, p. 251: “Messieurs le Moderateur et Recteur seront d put s en Conseil pour le prier de r tablir l’ancien ordre qui a est  discontinu , assavoir que l’on n’imprim t aucun de ces livres [de religion ou de morale] sans avoir la permission de Monsieur le Recteur.”
- ⁶ AEG, Cp. Past. R 15, 26 November 1686, p. 247: “Devoirs du recteur. Monsieur le Recteur a demand    la Compagnie s’il n’a pas le droit d’entrer dans les imprimeries pour voir ce qui s’y imprime, et ce qu’il doit faire   l’egard des livres que doivent Messieurs les libraires de la Bibliotheque. On n’a pas opin  de cette proposition.”
- ⁷ AEG, Cp. Past. R 16, 20 November 1688, pp. 85–86: “Monsieur le Moderateur a  t  pri  de dire un mot   Messieurs les Scholarques du refus que font Messieurs les libraires   Monsieurr le Recteur de prendre conessance de leurs ouvrages, ce qui est absolument contre le droit de sa charge.”
- ⁸ AEG, Cp. Past. R 8, 17 March 1627, p. 53: “La Compagnie extraordinairement assembl e, s’y est present  Monsieur Piffard, ministre en l’Eglise du fort de Barraux, lequel apr s avoir salu  affectueusement la Compagnie au nom du Colloque de Grenoble a represent  que Monsieur Bouteroux ayant ci devant fait un livre lequel par arrest du Parlement de Grenoble avoit est  brusl  publiquement   cause qu’il y avoit ces termes, que l’Eglise Romaine approuve les parricides des Rois, leur colloque avoit jug  expedient de faire voir le jour   l’Apologie que ledit Sieur Bouteroux avoit dress e, qui avoit est  leue et approuv e par les Pasteurs qui en avoyent eu la communication, afin de ne perdre l’occasion de l’afection que plusieurs ont de sonder ceste controverse, accreue par le precipit  jugement rendu contre le livre dudit Sieur Bouteroue, et qu’il l’aportoit, priant de la part dudit sieur qu’on la revist soigneusement, puisque c’estoit cause commune, et seroit tres aise d’en rapporter les advis et qu’au plustost on mit la main   l’ uvre.”
- ⁹ AEG, Cp. Past. R 8, 17 March 1627, p. 54: “La Compagnie ayant advis , la conclusion pour le regard du livre de Monsieur Bouteroue a est  que l’on escriroit   Monsieur Bouteroue les deux advis de la Compagnie, lesquels on subspectroit   son choix, l’un que s’il fait imprimer   l’instant le livre, il est expedient d’y changer certains endroitz pour causes importantes   la paix de l’Eglise de Grenoble, et   la seuret  de l’auteur. L’autre qu’il seroit plus utile, laissant tous autres discours, on faisoit simplement un amas des pieces justificatives pour verifier son assertion, d’o  les plus passionn s ne pourroyent prendre occasion de querele contre l’auteur, ne de trouble parmi l’Eglise. dont charge donn e   notre frere Monsieur Turretin de lui escrire et conferer du livre avec Messieurs Tronchin et Godefroy.”
- ¹⁰ AEG, Cp. Past. R 8, 6 April 1627, p. 55: “Monsieur Turretin nostre frere a fait entendre qu’il avoit receu lettre de Monsieur Bouteroux par lesquelles il remercioit grandement la Compagnie des bons advis qu’elle lui a donn  sur son livre, et que lui avec Messieurs de leur Consistoire trouveroyent   propos de faire une Apologie qui ne fut qu’une tresure de passages qui monstrent que les Papes ont approuv  les attentatz faits contre les rois, et mesmes avoyent jug  que ceste Apologie ne doit estre faire par

ledit Sieur Bouteroux, mais par un autre, priant la Compagnie d'en bailler charge à quelcun. Monsieur Turretin a esté chargé par la Compagnie et prié d'y travailler."

- 11 BGE, Arch. Tronchin 27, ff. 305–306: "[...] N'est-il pas nécessaire de monstrier le schisme et la division que est en l'Eglise Romaine sur ce subject si important et descouvrir la honte et la vergongne ? [...] Une mine evantée n'a point d'effet, une playe ouverte se descharge de son pus et de son ordure, [...]. Nostre Colloque qui a approuvé m'a proposition avoit aussi approuvé mon Apologie et s'est estonné avec desplaisir de ces longueurs et remises à mettre au jour ce qui est attendu de tout le monde et qu'il a jugé devoir estre d'un tres-grand fruit. Plusieurs excellens personnages de diverses conditions ausquelles je l'ay communiqué l'ont trouvé bon. [...]" <https://archives.bge-geneve.ch/ark:/17786/vta016408dcbef06098> (accessed on 18 August 2024).
- 12 The copy (Turretini 1627) I have read is the one held at the Princeton Library and available in digitized form online: <https://books.google.ch/books?id=d5lZAAAAYAAJ> (accessed on 18 August 2024). Very significantly, we can read on its title page, just after the title, the manuscript inscription: "Book worthy of burning" ("Ouvrage digne à bruler").
- 13 AEG, Cp. Past R 11, 10 May 1661, p. 173: "Liberté d'imprimer les livres de controverse dans Geneve maintenue. Representé que cy devant on a imprimé en ceste ville des livres de controverse où le pape est représenté au vif estre l'Antechrist, les Cardinaux, evesques etc. estre ses supposts, que quelques uns d'entre Messieurs n'approuvent pas certains termes picquans qui y sont et desireroient qu'ils fussent addoucis, que depuis peu ont esté envoyez certains livres de dehors pour imprimer en ce lieu, dans lesquels le pape est ouvertement nommé l'Antéchrist et la doctrine ou religion papistique appelée la doctrine des diables".
- 14 The book (Gros 1642) was published in 1642 under the pseudonym Sis Organon Iesu, which is an anagram for Joannes Grosius. It was re-issued in 1661 and 1663 with copies from the same edition, as a close comparison reveals, and only the first print sheet comporting the title was reprinted, these two times under the name of Jean Gros, "minister of the Holy Gospel in the Church of Geneva". A copy of the 1663 edition, held at the Lyon Library, is available online: <https://books.google.ch/books?id=d0zm6DTi-0C> (accessed on 18 August 2024).
- 15 AEG, R.C. 140, 25 January 1641, f. 14v: "Spectable Jean Gros, pasteur de ceste Eglise, ayant présenté requeste aux fins de luy estre permis de faire imprimer un livre par luy fait intitulé *Ouverture des secrets de l'Apocalypse de St Jean*, veu l'approbation des spectables Le Clerc, recteur, Diodati, Tronchin et Spanheim, professeurs en theologie dont il fait apparoir, Arresté qu'on permet ladite impression avec privilege pendant dix annees prochaines."
- 16 AEG, R.C. 193, 12 April 1693, pp. 94–96.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 95–96: "Les ennemis de nôtre sainte Religion ont souvent pris occasion et pretexte de la mepreiser, et de se moquer du culte que nous rendons à la Divinité dans nos Temples"; "Les faire imprimer, avec l'approbation dans le tiltre des Pasteurs et Professeurs de cette Eglise et Accademie."; "L'honneur et [...] la reputation de cette Eglise [...] se trouve bien avant interessée, en ce que passant pour la principale et comme la mere nourrice des Eglises Reformées, il semble qu'une semblable revision, changment et introduction ne se doit pas faire sans son intervention et approbation."
- 18 AEG, Cp. Past. R 16, 1st November 1689, p. 195: "[...] ce qui est absolument contre la liberté du commerce, et même contre l'honneur de cete Eglise et Academie qui a toujours été considerée comme la source et la mere de ces impressions, et traductions des livres sacrez." Other references to the same case are as follows: 30 Aug. 1689, p. 181; 6 Sept., p. 181bis and 182; 27 Sept., p. 188; 8 Nov., p. 197.

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