

Michael Allen Gillespie
'The Anti-Trinitarian Origins of Liberalism'

Response
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Bold, iconoclastic papers that challenge us to think about the theological origins of modernity are most welcome, and rather rare. This is especially true in a field such as Reformation studies, which remains reticent about making larger claims. Recent works by Charles Taylor and Brad Gregory, however, have advanced controversial theses concerning the place of the Reformation in the formation of modern thought, and the heated debate they have engendered is a good thing. These books have turned the conversation to the place of Protestant interpretations of the Bible and the origins of modern subjectivity.

The fracturing of theological systems and the fundamental questioning of authority during the sixteenth century defined the early modern world. Luther's protest and the advent of the *solae* (scripture, grace, faith) gave rise during the Reformation to confessional identities (Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed), competing forms of Christianity that made contesting truth claims grounded in their interpretation of the Bible as well as of theological and ecclesiastical traditions. So profound were the changes that in 1521 Luther could declare the authority of scripture alone, while from the middle of the following century figures such as Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza and Richard Simon openly doubted the historical authenticity of the scriptural texts. Much of the story of the Reformation, and of early modern religion in general, has to do with reconciling authority and plurality. What did it mean to have multiple interpretations of the Bible? How could people of different confessions live together in one polity? No one claimed that any of this could be achieved by diluting absolute verities. Erasmus was prepared to tolerate the existence of Lutherans within the state, not because he thought it was a good thing, but *ad tempus* and to avoid strife. Accommodation to fallen humanity was not weakness; even Sebastian Castellio, who figures prominently in this paper, declared, 'I hate heretics'. From 1531 the Swiss Confederation, from 1555 the Holy Roman Empire, and later the Dutch Republic had to find pragmatic ways to accommodate religious difference in order to prevent political and social disintegration, and war. The Elizabethan settlement of religion in England was a form of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'. Martyrdom, massacres and assassinations accompanied religious difference, and the domesticating of churches, Catholic and Protestant, by temporal authorities for the sake of public order and commercial activity signaled the presence of multiple priorities.

This is the larger story of change in the early modern world. Does anti-Trinitarianism occupy a particular or singular role in that transition? No doubt its

appearance and dissemination, if only ever among individuals and small groups, bear witness to the theological buffet that appeared after 1520. But to attribute to anti-Trinitarianism the role granted by Michael Gillespie is hard to sustain, particularly when we probe a little the connections the reader is asked to make. The problem, I would argue, is that Professor Gillespie takes one part of the breakdown in religious consensus and seeks to make it the interpretive key. He wants to demonstrate that 'it was the anti-Trinitarianism that he [Servetus] defended that ultimately provided the answer to the intolerance and fanaticism at the heart of the Reformation conflict.' The language of this claim is found throughout the paper, in which virtually everything associated with the Reformation is portrayed as negative. A familiar story propagated in the sixteenth century, by Castellio and others, in which John Calvin was the bloodthirsty tyrant determined to kill the innocent Servetus, having been bested by him in debate, is sympathetically retold. It is done so without any indication of very different interpretations, such as the one provided by Roland Bainton (no friend of Calvin and a great admirer of Castellio), that fit much less easily into the narrative pursued in this paper. Why, one must ask, did Servetus come to Geneva? He claimed he was on his way to Italy, but even a cursory glance at a map reveals the ease with which Calvin's city could have been skirted.

One does not have to be an apologist for Calvin, or any of the other magisterial reformers, to ask for a little more nuanced reading of their work and assessment of their actions. One of the most significant discussions during the Reformation, not surprisingly given the origin of the movement, was what constituted heresy and what were the obligations of temporal rulers to preserve the faith. Assessments of theological diversity in the early modern period cannot be effectively prosecuted through binaries of tolerance and intolerance (particularly when these terms are never really defined), but have to be grounded in contemporary debates if we are to enter the mental world of these communities. Sebastian Castellio was concerned about whether a magistrate could legitimately put a person to death for false belief. He did not accept that it was fine for the person to hold such beliefs. They should be corrected as a matter of urgency, just not with a sword. Not for a moment did he defend the substance of Servetus' writing. For every attack on Calvin for the execution of Servetus came letters of support to the Genevan council insisting that the magistrates do their duty and put the heretic to death. This was not a simple morality tale. It was a society torn apart by unresolved questions and contrary impulses, and no one was more aware of the disastrous consequences for the church than Calvin himself.

The reader of the paper is asked to accept some severe judgments that are not sufficiently substantiated. On the basis of remarks of Susan Ritchie the serious allegation is made that an aspect of the rise of Trinitarianism in the fourth century was anti-Semitism. Possibly, but to pick that one aspect is to make an association that colors the whole argument. Whether we find that position in current scholarship is hard to know, as nothing is referenced. Geneva, we read, was 'ruthlessly intolerant not merely of Catholics but of radical reformers'. Really? More so than the fires of Marian England or the drowning of radicals in the Venetian

lagoon? (See John Martin's *Venice's Hidden Enemies* for a rather different view of the city than is presented in the paper.) Even thirty minutes spent with the English translation of the Genevan Consistory minutes provides a more complex picture of the quotidian relations of politics, church and community in Geneva. If the place was so terrible, why was it flooded with refugees on a scale virtually unmatched in sixteenth-century Europe?

Why, we need to explain, did the books and pamphlets of this supposedly repressive and intolerant faith find such large audiences of lay readers from the Huguenot in France during the Wars of Religion to Scandinavian Lutherans and the Protestants of Eastern Europe discussed in this paper? This literature contained a broad spectrum of views that included the works of magisterial reforms and radicals and many hybrid positions in between. The canny printers of the Reformation knew their markets and did not engage in vanity publishing. They produced what they could sell and in that world Calvin's commentaries on the Bible were highly lucrative. Again, one does not have to be invested in defending the reformers or the emergent Protestant churches to trace crucial theological shifts – in which radical voices were highly significant. To do so, however, by valorizing and vilifying different groups and individuals reveals only modern assumptions and obscures what really happened in the Reformation.

It is hard to know with whom Professor Gillespie is in conversation in this discussion. The secondary literature cited in the notes does not point to the most significant and rigorous historical and theological work in the field. Readers looking to explore questions of tolerance/toleration or of religious coexistence must begin with Benjamin Kaplan's *Divided by Faith*, which I could not find referenced. Graeme Murdock has discussed the difficulties of reading the east European context as proto-modern. Repeatedly ideas and individuals are linked without attribution. Calvin and Castellio did not split over questions of church and state (p8). Those terms, with their modern American associations, did not exist in the sixteenth century and were certainly not the reasons the two men quarreled. They disagreed over the nature and interpretation of scripture. A looseness of language runs through the essay. What does it mean to say of Socinus that his Christianity was 'not merely anti-Trinitarian but humanistic as well'? Or that he is remembered as 'a vindicator of human reason versus the supernatural'? What is 'humanistic' and what is meant by 'supernatural'? For that matter, what does it mean to call early modern thinkers 'liberal'?

Professor Gillespie offers us a challenging and engaging interpretation of the Reformation and post-Reformation worlds. He is absolutely right to draw our attention to the ways in which new questions and methods of thought arose and exercised very real influence on the formation of communities and conceptions of Christianity. He is right to identify anti-Trinitarianism as a significant part of this story. But his case could be made more effectively by not simply casting those who opposed the figures he discusses as benighted and intolerant, using very modern language and conceptions to dismiss them. The issue of anti-Trinitarianism belongs

to the epistemological crisis of the early modern world—the world of Copernicanism, Mosaic physics, Descartes, Hobbes and Spinoza. How could one know something to be true? In increasingly complex societies how could one sustain plurality without surrendering truth? Such unresolved questions taxed an entire age, from Galileo to Milton. An attempt to trace the lineage of modern thought in this respect would do well to go beyond the anti-Trinitarians to Erasmus and his teaching on the ‘philosophy of Christ’, which linked learning and moral action. The great humanist was crystal clear that error could not be combated by coercion and suppression – the failure to stop Luther was evidence enough of that. A dead heretic cannot repent. The faithful and heretics could only be instructed through ‘persuasion’, following the model of Christ and Paul, who adapted themselves to their audience and used expediency to convince. This embrace of diversity, within the bounds of sixteenth-century belief, is a more compelling source of later thought. Without Erasmus, the flourishing of Calvinism, the Jesuits, radical thinkers, and, arguably, the Enlightenment, are unimaginable.

The Reformation shattered an ancient unity and created new possibilities for conceiving of God and the world, possibilities that would be pushed to the limit by contact with the new world, Asian cultures, empirical science and textual work on the Bible. The story cannot be told through binaries, and there is no golden key that explains everything. History is too messy and interesting for that.