

Response to Michael Gillespie, "The Anti-Trinitarian Origins of Liberalism"

Evan Haefeli, Columbia University

There is a longstanding love of mono-causal explanations in the history of toleration. While Gillespie does not assert that the anti-Trinitarian strand that he traces is the only ingredient of modern liberalism, one does come away with the feeling that it was perhaps the most important, contributing the element of rationalism that neither Calvinism nor Roman Catholicism could. The importance of anti-Trinitarianism to the history of tolerance will be news to early American historians, who have tended to stress the influence of Quakers, in the person of William Penn; Baptists, usually in the person of Isaac Backus; or radical Protestants like Roger Williams (virtually impossible to pin down denominationally). Even in the debates over religious freedom in revolutionary Virginia that culminated with the disestablishment clause of the United States Constitution, James Madison, who acted more out of sympathy to Baptists than Unitarian impulses, receives more credit than Thomas Jefferson. In short, while there is no doubt that by the revolutionary era, there was some anti-Trinitarian thought circulating in America, there were many other, and arguably more influential, sources of religious tolerance to draw on.

The essay raises several questions. The first is whether or not people had to adopt the beliefs of the anti-Trinitarians in order to be reasonable and liberal? As Gillespie acknowledges, only a handful of individuals in Britain and America did. Anti-Trinitarianism, or Socinianism as it was commonly known then, is a bold choice to bet on in the race for liberal values. After all, even at their most tolerant the Dutch Republic, the British monarchy, and many of the revolutionary American state constitutions, all agreed

that Socinianism was one of the few sets of beliefs that was definitely beyond the pale. Yet liberalism prevailed in these societies.

Socinianism certainly was an influence on thinkers like John Locke, but not the only one. Indeed, there is much about Locke's ideas on tolerance, especially the principle of non-coercion of the conscience, that resonates with what radical Protestants, such as Separatists, Baptists, and Quakers, had been arguing for in the century before he put pen to paper. Locke's ideas had a tremendous appeal in the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world not because they proposed something new, but because they could so easily accord with the diversity of religious arrangements and attitudes that existed on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, especially among Protestants. Even many eighteenth-century Anglicans argued that theirs was a moderate church, although scholars are gradually realizing this was a political stance as much as a value in and of itself.¹ What is clear is that the ostensibly secular and transcendent ideal of tolerance widely associated with Locke derives from Protestant imperatives - which is leading some scholars to start questioning just how universally applicable Lockean liberalism really is.²

Another question raised by Gillespie's narrative is just what is tolerance - who does it benefit and why would anyone embrace it? Here the importance of Protestantism (or perhaps anti-Catholicism?) to of the rise of liberalism becomes clear in a perhaps inadvertent association Gillespie makes, when describing Bona Sforza in Poland adopting

¹ Ethan H. Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation: Violence, Religion and the Politics of Restraint in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). American historians such as Chris Beneke, *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), are picking up on the way talk of moderation and tolerance could still be rooted in the advancement of the interests of particular religious groups in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Though they disagreed on the ends sought, they agreed on need to present them in moderate terms.

² Jakob De Roover and S.N. Balagangadhara, "John Locke, Christian Liberty, and the Predicament of Liberal Toleration," *Political Theory* 36:4 (2008): 523-49.

"a more tolerant and at times anti-Catholic position." (14) Was there a difference between the two? And what, one wonders, is the place of Catholics and Catholicism (not to mention the Muslims and others lurking on the fringe of Europe) in this version of liberalism's origins? Certainly Maryland, founded by Catholics, has been arguing since the revolutionary era that it is as much a part of the story as its neighbor Pennsylvania.

Ultimately, Gillespie's essay demonstrates the difficulty of drawing direct connections between Reformation-era thinkers and the late eighteenth-century Anglo-American world that is widely regarded as the hearth of modern liberalism.³ After an engaging discussion of the political and religious connections between Italy and Eastern Europe, which allowed anti-Trinitarianism to gain such a strong foothold in Transylvania and Poland, his account then dissipates into some rather tenuous leaps and bounds of causality linking late sixteenth-century eastern Europe with the eighteenth-century Anglo-American Enlightenment. Much is lost in between, including the various French toleration edicts from the wars of religion (culminating with the comparatively conservative Edict of Nantes), the Dutch Union of Utrecht, various grants and arrangements from across the Holy Roman Empire, and, most relevant, the numerous English debates and struggles, not least of which being the revolution of the 1640s. While Anglo-Americans would have had some awareness of the story Gillespie tells, there were many other examples of tolerance closer at hand that did not require Socinianism.

Servetus was a famous case, but it was more his fame as a victim of persecution (due in no small part to the campaign for tolerance it inspired in Sebastian Castellio) than his beliefs per se that turned him into an iconic figure in the history of tolerance. Many

³ In this he is not alone. For example, Hans Guggisberg waged a lifelong campaign to place Sebastian Castellio at the heart of the narrative of European tolerance, while Jonathan Israel is currently seeking to do much the same with Spinoza.

found his case all the more disconcerting because his tormentors were Protestants, not Catholics. Generally, Protestant governments preferred to claim they executed men for political reasons, not their beliefs. The Elizabethan government, for example, argued that its execution of Catholic priests and Jesuits was a political act, not an act of religious persecution (Catholics of course disputed this). This did not stop their victims' coreligionists from turning them into martyrs, be it the Jesuit Edmund Campion or the Quaker Mary Dyer. However, it was a cornerstone of Protestant ideology that it was they who were the persecuted ones (indeed to be persecuted was a sign of being a true church), giving accusations of persecution a powerful valence in Protestant societies. Servetus's fate is one poignant reminder of this tendency.⁴

There is no doubt in my mind that there are religious origins to secular liberalism. Indeed, I wonder if secularism is really as devoid of religious associations as many believe it is. However, to give all the credit to the emergence of our liberal world to one particular set of beliefs, thinkers, or activists seems to sell short what was in fact a complex and constantly evolving set of struggles, contests, and unpredictable outcomes.

⁴ See, for example, Adrian Chastain Weimer, Martyrs' Mirror: Persecution and Holiness in Early New England (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).