

Response to Michael A. Gillespie, 'The Anti-Trinitarian Origins of Liberalism'
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Coming somewhat late to this forum, it seems I have the privilege and responsibility of having the last words on it.

In answering the previous respondents, Michael Gillespie has already clarified the aims of his essay and the audience toward which he conceived it as directed. He wishes to remind people of the religious, indeed Christian roots of modern thought. Applauded by several respondents, this goal is in fact one Gillespie shares with much recent work on liberalism and secularism. It has become almost a commonplace that behind these modern-isms lies a conception of religion that has a Christian, some say distinctly Protestant, origin and character: religion as an individual commitment to a set of beliefs. The priority of individuals, the necessity of their having freedom to choose their commitments, and the obligation to respect individuals' choices are all said to have flowed from this conception, along with the reduction of religion to the status of a subjective and ultimately optional life-choice. It is high time this commonplace were interrogated more critically. One way to do so would be to re-examine the relationship between Protestantism and the thought of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers such as John Locke. As Evan Haefeli has pointed out, Gillespie (restricting his purview to anti-Trinitarianism) presumes rather than demonstrates a direct, constitutive influence of the one on the other. In his answer, Michael Gillespie concedes the point, but doesn't seem to acknowledge that he has left the most important point of his essay almost entirely unsubstantiated.

Gillespie also concedes the point made by Haefeli that, in terms of intellectual filiation, anti-Trinitarianism was not the sole source of liberalism or of the modern notion of toleration. Bruce Gordon and Graeme Murdoch make a somewhat different point—one that I am less confident Professor Gillespie has taken on board—, namely the inadequacy of an approach to history that looks for the 'origins' of -isms such as liberalism in the intellectual filiations of a few key concepts. Gordon directs our attention instead to what he aptly calls 'the epistemological crisis of the early modern world': the enormous difficulty in establishing satisfactory grounds for conviction in the irreducibly plural, confessionally fragmented context of the post-Reformation period. Decades ago, sociologists such as Peter Berger and Niklas Luhmann highlighted this dilemma, seeing it as a progenitor of modern secularism. Murdoch, by contrast, emphasizes 'context'. By this I think he means principally the relations of power between religious groups in any given time and place. Echoing Andrew Pettegree, he suggests tolerance was 'always a loser's creed' in early modern Europe. I'm not sure the 'always' is correct. The Dutch Republic is one possible counter-example, for it is difficult to characterize the regents who ruled the Republic, and who in general strongly promoted tolerance, as 'losers'. That said, I believe both Gordon's and Murdoch's approaches to the issue at hand are more promising than Gillespie's.

I would like, finally, to point out a flawed assumption that seems to underlie Gillespie's essay, as it does the writing of many other scholars about tolerance. It is that where one finds toleration, one necessarily finds what Gillespie calls 'liberal sentiment'. Gillespie finds the latter in Erasmus, in his anti-Trinitarian heroes, and in early-modern eastern Europe generally, especially Transylvania. Gillespie admits of difference, but only a difference of degree: where there was more toleration, he finds more liberal sentiment; where less, less. But as Graeme Murdoch points out, liberal

sentiment was signally absent in Transylvania, including among the foremost proponents of toleration there. This fact is not really so puzzling, once one admits the possibility that fully-fledged systems of toleration can be justified by extremely illiberal concepts and values, and can take extremely illiberal forms. With regard to Erasmus, for example, one might point to the supreme value he placed on “concord,” which sought as its principal goal the restoration of religious unity. With regard to Transylvania, one should note that the system of pluralism there entailed not a disestablishment of religion but a multiple establishment that required individuals to adhere to the orthodoxy of one of the four ‘received’ religions. By design, the Transylvanian arrangement vested groups, not individuals, with religious freedom. In these respects, it resembled arrangements that developed around the same time in parts of Switzerland, in certain German cities, and in much of France; by the same token, it resembled even older arrangements in the Ottoman Empire. Toleration, in short, can take qualitatively very different forms. Only a particular, modern form of it should be associated with liberalism, and, as I have argued elsewhere, the early modern forms did not evolve by any direct path into the modern one.