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

The apparent revival of religion and belief as a significant agent in contemporary politics has come as an unwelcome surprise to those who thought that secularism's inexorable triumph was assured. Writers from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds have stepped forward to assist public debate about this strange new turn in the history of religion. Particular attention has focussed, for understandable reasons, on the alleged connections between religion and violence. Interrogation of religion's suggested propensity for violence, however, has certainly not been the sole area of inquiry about religion's enduring significance. Michael Gillespie has been among those who have queried accounts of the secular character of the contemporary West, arguing for the theological origins of modernity.

This is clearly all very good news for historians of religion, and especially welcome for historians of the Reformation. The Reformation has proved an enduring conceptual framework describing the transformative processes of religion's march towards modernity. Among the most significant changes to flow from the Reformation was the seemingly ineradicable fracture of the Church into competing confessions. Churches sought allies among secular magistrates in their efforts to (re-)impose orthodoxy and eliminate heresy. There was widespread popular support for church and state campaigns against religious minorities who undermined the sacral nature of community. However, attempts by churches and states to persecute heretics proved ineffective and often counter-productive. In varied political contexts, and in response to local patterns of religious demography, many states reluctantly turned to alternative strategies and policies, embarking upon the adventure of religious pluralism.

What were the long-term consequences of this explosion of different ideas about Christian doctrine during the Reformation and of this shift towards confessional competition and something we might recognise as religious tolerance? Many historians of religion who specialise in the Reformation period are reluctant to engage with such questions and prefer life behind the barriers of their areas of specialist knowledge. For example, histories of the revival of anti-Trinitarianism during the sixteenth century rarely offer any considered assessment of the long-term political and social consequences of this religious movement. This makes a reading of Michael Gillespie's article about the 'anti-Trinitarian origins of liberalism' all the more stimulating. Gillespie suggests that the development and transmission

of anti-Trinitarian doctrine speaks to the transformation of Christianity into a religion that was capable of engendering and sustaining something like liberalism. While I cannot agree with some points of his analysis, this is not I hope done in a spirit of disciplinary protectionism of early modern religious history.

Gillespie identifies anti-Trinitarian reformers as the unacknowledged forefathers of liberalism and suggests direct connections and inspiration between anti-Trinitarians, advocates of religious liberty and liberalism. Where Gillespie sees 'Roman roads' from anti-Trinitarianism towards tolerance and liberalism, I see at best the 'strange windings and turnings of providence' or perhaps only the operation of the law of unintended consequences. The re-emergence of anti-Trinitarianism during the sixteenth century is certainly an unlikely tale, which Gillespie sets out very clearly here. Southern European humanists' intense engagement with the Bible opened up debates about the nature of Christ among intellectuals and reformers. The unexpected outcome of those debates was the emergence of anti-Trinitarian churches in the most unlikely of areas of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and lands of the medieval Hungarian kingdom. Anti-Trinitarianism briefly gained princely support at the Transylvanian court of János Zsigmond Zápolyai. Zápolyai's backing ensured that anti-Trinitarian preachers gained legal protection in 1568 in Transylvania as those whose faith in God had come from 'listening to the word of God' [i] However, this protection was limited by a 1571 decree of Zápoylai's successor that outlawed any doctrinal changes among legally-recognised churches. This ossified the developing doctrine of the anti-Trinitarian church around formulas which recognised that Christ must be worshipped and adored. Transylvanian anti-Trinitarianism was thus the product of political compromise and legal restrictions as well as the result of insights offered by some humanist intellectuals.

Gillespie suggests that the edicts about religious rights in Transylvania issued under Zápolyai amounted to declarations of toleration, but tolerance was certainly still seen as a vice not a virtue in sixteenth-century Transylvania. As Gillespie acknowledges, most ordinary people, including those who attended anti-Trinitarian churches, had no active choice in determining the form of worship practised in their community. In addition, Catholic priests remained excluded from the principality as their faith was not deemed to be based upon 'listening to the word of God'. Anti-Trinitarian clergy in Transylvania also exhibited no less than their

confessional rivals a ferocious enthusiasm for religious polemic—there were particularly bitter debates between anti-Trinitarians and Calvinists. Anti-Trinitarian preachers sought to convert as many people as possible, but their limited success consigned the Unitarian church to life as a religious minority. Anti-Trinitarians clung on to their legal rights in Transylvania but were soon deprived of any legal protection in Poland. Perhaps here we might see the most likely association between anti-Trinitarianism and enthusiasm for religious tolerance. After all, tolerance was always a loser's creed in early modern Europe. Those on the margins of Reformation Europe, including anti-Trinitarians, had a direct self-interest in developing a moral and theoretical framework which justified the extension of legal rights to minority religious groups. From this perspective, connections established in the eighteenth century and beyond between anti-Trinitarians, advocates of religious liberty and liberals might again be regarded as more to do with context than the doctrine or character of anti-Trinitarian religion. Some who wished to articulate the positive moral value of tolerance certainly focussed attention on the plight of anti-Trinitarians, but they were merely helpful examples of perennial victims of religious persecution used to evoke sympathy for the sincere heretic who ought to be tolerated as a signal of a more civilized or modern way of doing religion.

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[i] The quote from the resolutions of the Transylvanian diet comes from *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek. Monumenta Comitialia Regni Transsylvaniae*, (ed.) Sándor Szilágyi (21 vols) (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1875-1898), vol. 2 (1877), 343.