

Response to Gillespie, “**ANTI-TRINITARIAN ORIGINS OF LIBERALISM**”

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Michael Gillespie fills an important gap in our picture of the development of the modern, liberal thought world we now live in, and he does so by showing the usually overlooked link between this development and the rebellion of early modern thinkers against a central element of the religious tradition that sustained the political system they were trying to change. He describes how “Servetus and the anti-Trinitarians created a notion of human freedom and dignity that became the foundation for a more liberal worldview,” and he says that their attack on the Trinity was central to this effort.

I am fully in agreement with Gillespie in his analysis, and I greatly appreciate the history he recounts, especially the comparatively little known story of the Edict of Torda (1568) as the first edict of toleration in modern Europe and the way the humanist women of the Sforza family spread the spirit of Erasmian humanism and toleration in Eastern Europe. However, since one might wonder where the particular form of trinitarianism Servetus and others criticized came from and what historical developments shaped it, it may be helpful if I sketch some of what lay in the background of Servetus’s effort to rethink the received Christianity of his place and time. Also, if one were to concentrate only on the version of trinitarianism he rejected, one might overlook the ways in which Servetus’s critique was not simply an attack on the Christian symbolism of the Triune God but also involved an effort of recovery of a different way of interpreting that symbolism that had deep roots in the Christian tradition itself.

Servetus is known to have carried a copy of Erasmus's Latin translation of Irenaeus in his travels, and as Ronald Bainton says, "Servetus' view of the person of Christ was conditioned by his conception of man and of the relation of man to God. He had appropriated from Ignatius [of Antioch] and Irenaeus in particular something more than a new formula to describe the godhead. He had imbibed their own profound sense that the new life in Christ is a life in which we no longer live but Christ lives in us. One may even say that God lives in us. Those who make a sharp demarcation between humanity and divinity, said Servetus, 'do not understand the nature of humanity which is of such a character that God can communicate to it divinity,' 'not indeed by a degradation of divinity but by an exaltation of humanity.'"¹ When Irenaeus said (*Adversus haereses*, V, 9, 1), drawing on the imagery of the Spirit of God pervading creation and working to raise Israel into sonship to God, "There are three elements of which...the complete man is made up, flesh, soul, and spirit; one of these preserves and fashions the man, and this is the spirit; another is given unity and form by the first, and this is the flesh; the third, the soul, is midway between the first two, and sometimes it is subservient to the spirit and is raised by it: while sometimes it allies itself with the flesh and descends to earthly passions," the spirit he was speaking of was the breath of God's life (Holy Spirit) breathed into human beings and raising them (when its force was not countered by a movement of descent "to earthly passions") into the participation in Christ's divine-human life that later came to be called in the Eastern Christian tradition *theosis*. That Irenaeus was in his own way a Christian humanist suited to inspire the humanism of

¹ Roland H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus 1511-1553*, 46-47, quoting from Servetus, *De Trinitatis Erroribus Libri Septem, Per Michaelen Serueto, alias Reues, ab Aragonia Hispanum* (1531), 11b and 12a.

Servetus can be seen from his saying that “the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man is the vision of God” (Adversus haereses, IV, 20, 6).

Perhaps as comparatively little known, at least to most modern Christians, as the history Gillespie recounts is the role of the Carolingians in stamping on Western Christianity and western trinitarianism the particular character that Servetus felt he had to challenge. There is not space in this brief response to give much detail, so I will simply summarize a few relevant points from my longer study, In Search of the Triune God: The Christian Paths of East and West.² From the time of Saint Augustine the symbolism of the Triune God in the Eastern and Western Christian traditions had begun to diverge significantly. The East’s interpretation of the symbolism tended to base itself on the imagery of Christ’s baptism, with the descent of the Spirit coming from the Father to rest upon or in the Son. As St. John of Damascus phrased it in his commentary on the Nicene Creed, “We likewise believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and abides in the Son.”³ Augustine, in contrast, approached the symbolism in terms of a speculation about what there might be three of in God, and when he finally worked out what seemed to him the most satisfactory answer—on the basis of an analogy to the triad of memory, reason, and will in human beings—he drew what seemed to him the logical conclusion that if the Son was God’s reason and the Spirit God’s will, then the Spirit must proceed from both the Father and the Son, since otherwise it would not be a rational will. That way of thinking gradually spread in the West, but it was Charlemagne and his court theologians who imposed that formulation as

² Scheduled for publication by the University of Missouri Press in Fall 2013.

³ “The Orthodox Faith,” Book 1, Chapter 8, in Saint John of Damascus: Writings, translated by Frederic Hathaway Chase, 183-84.

the official belief of the western Church by interpolating the famous *filioque* phrase into the creed and having it recited in the mass.⁴

Since Charlemagne was being interpreted as the vicar of Christ on earth (with the pope only the vicar of Peter and subordinate to Charlemagne⁵), it enhanced Charlemagne's authority to raise Jesus from one who could receive the Spirit from the Father to one who generated the very existence of the Spirit and was therefore a kind of co-God with the Father. And even more importantly for Carolingian purposes, to be able to assert that the original Nicene Creed still used in the East was defective without the *filioque* could serve to delegitimize Charlemagne's rivals in Constantinople. After Charlemagne the power and authority he had held became an object of competition not only for his multiple heirs but also for the papacy, which moved from "vicar of Peter" to "vicar of Christ" as it gradually began to claim the kind of absolute authority that Servetus and other reformers would rebel against.⁶

There is much more to the story than this, but these aspects of it are worth keeping in mind for those who may be interested in other possibilities for the Christian religion. If that religion is to have a future that can encompass and embrace the humanism of Servetus and the other figures Gillespie talks about, it will need to do so by recovering, as Servetus, Luther, et al., were trying to do, a broader range of Christian

⁴ See Hans Küng, *Christianity: Essence, History and Future*, 356-57.

⁵ See Alcuin's letter to Charlemagne of June 799, quoted in Friedrich Heer, *Charlemagne and His World*, 139, and Folz, *The Coronation of Charlemagne*, 125.

⁶ It was Innocent III (reigned 1198-1216) who declared "vicar of Christ" the pope's official title and dispensed with "vicar of Peter." Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) had declared the pope to be the real embodiment in this world of Christ's personhood: "bone of his bones, flesh of his flesh, and spirit of his spirit" ("Os de ossibus suis, carnem de carne sua, spiritum de spiritu suo." Bernard of Clairvaux, Epistle 126, quoted in Ullmann, *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages*, 429).

tradition than the western Trinitarians who used the image of Jesus as an instrument of power were aware of.⁷

⁷ On Luther and Eastern Christian thought, see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One with God: Salvation As Deification and Justification*.