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SCRIPTURE, TRADITION AND INTOLERANCE: an introduction  
to the critique of Sebastian Castellio (1515-1563)

Ian Haslett

More than 400 years ago Castellio wrote that "There has never been so much strife evil and wickedness. Today the world is full of confusion, especially in religious matters." /2 What then seems to be a modern cliché has an ancient pedigree. As we shall see, Castellio's lamentation was linked to his belief in the obscurity of scripture. /3 This was to make him persona non grata in Protestant Reformation circles among which he moved. For in Reformation theology, belief in the 'claritas et synceritas scripturae' was axiomatic.

The vexatious times in which Castellio lived were part of the Reformation era (1520-1648) comprising both the Protestant and Catholic reformations. Traditionally the churches have conditioned their people to look back on this era with rosy spectacles - apart from the unfortunate matter of the schism. And indeed if one looks no further than the noble aspects of the epoch's religious physiognomy, then it is not hard to conclude that heroes, saints, scholars and prophets were thick on the ground in those days.

Yet it can also be maintained that the times constituted a shocking caricature of Christianity, or that the old perversions were substituted by new and more nasty ones. From all accounts it is accepted that in the period between 1525 and 1648, more Christians were killed, maimed or deprived by other Christians - in the name of Jesus Christ or dogmatic verities - than in any other period in the entire history of Christianity before or since. Such was the price for the struggle over the proper understanding of scripture.

In order not to get bogged down in generalities, we will confine ourselves to the question of the treatment of heretics and its theological and biblical justification. Underlying this question is the issue of toleration and intolerance. In pursuance of medieval Christian tradition, the Reformation era in its Catholic and Protestant expressions was intolerant. For intolerance was a commonly accepted dogma cutting across confessional divides. It was allegedly a divinely legitimized dogma. Any doubts on the matter were seen as disrespectful of God. /4

The modern Christian view, or at least the assumption of modern Christians, is that it would be unthinkable to subject religious deviants to the civil penal code, still less make them liable to capital or corporal punishment. This way of thinking is a relatively late arrival in Christian thought; in fact it is alien to the mass of post-Constantinian Christian tradition as a whole. Further, while toleration nowadays is considered a commonplace, the principle of toleration has never in fact been formally and explicitly incorporated in any ecclesiastical corpus or confession of Christian doctrine. The inherent doctrinal intolerance of Christianity makes this a difficult thing to do. It seems hard to avoid the conclusion then that the practice of toleration as we now know it has been imposed on Christianity from outside. That is, toleration did not emerge spontaneously from within the Church. It did not develop as a fruit of faith, since for so long it was seen as incompatible with faith. And so on this fundamental question, what was unthinkable yesterday is today's de facto orthodoxy.

To clarify the concepts of tolerance and intolerance, which in practice are inseparable from church-state relations: both notions can operate in one of two ways, though not necessarily exclusively. These ways are either formal or substantive. Formal toleration is grounded on neutrality or indifference, at least on the part of the civil power which guarantees the toleration. Substantive toleration is based on a positive appreciation of the religious value of all or the others. Toleration as we know it today is an undefined mixture of formal and substantive toleration.

Formal intolerance is inseparable from substantive intolerance. It involves coercion to uniformity of belief and practice, - or as we see it in modern times, uniformity of unbelief. In default of conformity, civil rights are either withdrawn or diminished. Where the Church has been the undisputed mistress of society, formal substantive intolerance has prevailed.

In a typically universal religion like Christianity, tolerance and intolerance are connected to the predominance of one of two strains. These are the prophetic-biblical, and the mystical. When the prophetic-biblical tradition is dominant, then exclusive claims to absolute truth are advanced. /5 Where possible, this leads to formal and

substantive intolerance, putting the lives and property of dissidents, heretics etc. in danger.

When the mystical tradition manifests itself - it can rarely be dominant - it is accompanied by impulses of substantive toleration. Mysticism's notions of learned ignorance and pious irrationalism give rise to those impulses. It tends to recognize that there are diverse ways of perceiving God, and so can wander into eclecticism.

The Church has of course experienced both sides of the threshold of secular power. On the one side, it has had to struggle for toleration - of itself, that is - as in the early Christian era, the Reformation era, and in modern times. On the other side, it has had to consider whether or not to accord toleration to others, throughout a period of about 1300 years. Almost without exception the Churches have refused toleration to Christian heretics, schismatics and dissidents, although the attitude to minorities of Jews, Moslems and pagans was surprisingly more permissive, at least in theory. In short, when the Church has been persecuted, it has advocated toleration; when it became legalized and established, it has urged intolerance of heterodox Christians.

To turn to Sebastian Castellio: 6/ He was one of the Reformation's isolated figures. In his life and work he was something of an anti-hero. He was not in any official sense a heretic, though he could hardly be characterized as orthodox. His significance lies in the fact that he took it upon himself to try and make a chink in the armour of the ancient Christian tradition of intolerance. Indeed he was one of the first Christian theologians to argue for the principle of formal and substantive toleration of Christian deviants by Church and State. The undertaking was daunting. He once noted that he felt "like a fly trying to bring down an elephant." /7

With the exception of one or two Enlightenment figures and a handful of Christian Liberals, Castellio has been largely ignored and forgotten about. This is due chiefly to prejudice. Secularist writers have found him too religious, and most Christian writers have found him not religious enough. With a combination like that, oblivion is guaranteed.

Castellio came from the Duchy of Savoy and was of mixed French and

Italian extraction. His education was at Lyons, where his studies were largely in the new subject of the day, the Classics. He did not study formal theology as such, but like all Christian Humanists he would have studied texts from the Bible and the Church Fathers. In this connection he would have come across the works of Erasmus, the doyen of Christian Humanism. Like many, though not all Christian humanists, he read and was convinced by the writings of Luther, and so opted for the Reformation cause.

During one of the intermittent anti-Reformation persecutions in France Castellio fled the country and made for Germany. He settled in Strasbourg where he joined many other French religious refugees. It is not unlikely that in Strasbourg, Castellio fell under the influence of a group of Christian free-thinkers and sceptics. Martin Bucer and the other Reformers referred to this group as "Epicureans", and denounced them as people who "really do not believe in anything at all". /8 But as it happened, Castellio was befriended by his compatriot, John Calvin, who was also working in Strasbourg at the time. When Calvin was called back to Geneva, he brought Castellio with him, intending an educational and catechetical role for him. He was put in charge of the prototype Genevan Academy. He published in this connection his "Dialogi sacri", /9 which was an introduction to the Bible with paraphrases and dialogues of scriptural stories in classical Latin, for use by pre-divinity students. The book enjoyed widespread success for over 200 years, and represents the sole enduring success of Castellio's life-work. /10 A Latin translation /11 of the Bible he did was criticized at the time on the grounds that Ciceronian style was inappropriate for the Word of God, and his French translation /12 was frowned upon since it was full of popular colloquialisms, and so improper.

In Geneva, Castellio tried unsuccessfully to enter the ministry. The chief ostensible reason for this was some important hermeneutical differences of opinion with Calvin. /13 The most notable of these was Castellio's denial of the canonicity of the Song of Songs. Calvin felt that this attitude might jeopardize the authority of the whole of Scripture as a valid witness to the holy Spirit. On another occasion Castellio complained about the defective morality and ethical hypocrisy of many of the Genevan ministers. He was eventually obliged to leave Geneva. As is often the case when someone is wanted rid of,

Calvin wrote for Castellio a glowing character reference. /14

Castellio made his way to Basle. Though the Church there was Zwinglian, the city had a relatively liberal reputation and was a famous centre of Christian humanism. Here Castellio became professor of Greek, and remained so until his death. He edited and published Greek classics. He also edited some Christian mystical writings, notably the 'Imitation of Christ' and the 'Theologia Germanica'.

A few years later, Castellio let himself be drawn into controversy with the Genevans again. This time it was over the issue of toleration. This followed the widely applauded execution in Geneva of the arch-heretic Michael Servetus. Castellio was in no way concerned with trying to defend Servetus, rather he questioned the whole practice of punishing and killing heretics. and so he wrote a book on the subject, and published it using a pseudonym, - "Concerning Heretics". /15

Before looking at Castellio's ideas on the subject, it is useful to recall how the Goliath of intolerance originated and established itself in Christianity. The chief progenitor was the Old Testament and Christian use of it. Once the Old Testament was accepted as part of the Christian canon, and once a strictly christological interpretation was imposed on it, then it was not hard to assert that Moses and Elijah were really aliases for Jesus Christ. And it is possible to trace the ebb and flow of Old Testament influence on the Church in a predictable manner until the beginning of biblical criticism. Where the Church had been persecuted, the Old Testament tends to be laid aside, except for the Genesis stories, the poetic literature, and the stories of the exiles. But where the Church has a decisive influence on the state, the Old Testament becomes more alive, consciously or unconsciously.

Firstly, the Church found ready made authority in the Old Testament for proceeding against heretics. Secondly, they found justification for ascribing religious authority - dominant or subordinate - to the state. The Magisterial Reformation for example was not slow to remind the state of its sacred duties.

As regards the extermination of heretics: once the Church was

convinced that serious doctrinal deviation was to be equated with blasphemy, idolatry, apostasy and false prophecy, then the biblical penal prescriptions were not hard to find. /16 Similarly the duties of the state as watchdog, governor, or secular arm of the Church were grounded on Old Testament kingship, particularly David, Josiah, and Hezekiah. The theocratic state then became the agent of coercive uniformity, that is, formal and substantive intolerance. So that, where there is an alliance between on the one hand Moses, the prophets, and Christ, and on the other hand the kings of Israel and the Christian state, religious totalitarianism ensued. The Old Testament was paradigmatic.

When considered by itself, the New Testament can hardly provide the justification for persecution of religious dissidents. It may well provide a basis for dogmatic and moral exclusiveness. But the worst that can happen to nonconformists is excommunication, - a spiritualization of the Deuteronomic death penalty. Christ's own methods and example, the rejection of natural force in spiritual matters, the notion of faith as voluntary, the idea of the two kingdoms, Paul's insistence on the primacy of love in dealing with those of weaker consciences, and so on, make it difficult to justify positive intolerance. Yet in this respect, the New Testament was later made to fit Old Testament preconceptions. The Old Testament was considered as fulfilling the New Testament. In Reformation times it was argued that the conditions obtaining in apostolic Christianity were abnormal. A notable representative of this way of thinking was Henry Bullinger in Zurich, a leading theoretician of the magisterial Reformation. /17 And so exegetical manipulation could make certain New Testament passages justify repression. The most notorious example of this is with regard to the parable of the wheat and the tares, /18 normally the bulwark of the tolerationists and the laxists. /19 It proved to be possible to base the execution of heretics on that too.

Taking the Patristic era as a whole, we find that it supplies later advocates of both toleration and intolerance with an arsenal of ammunition. This is explicable by the fact that in that period, the Church changes from being a persecuted Church pleading for toleration to a persecuting Church committed to the principle of intolerance. The dramatic change in the Church's political status accounts for this largely, though not only. In the earlier period we see Tertullian even

going so far as to argue for toleration on the basis of natural rights. /20

Exemplifying the transition in his own thought and person was Augustine. Everyone had heard of Augustine's conversion. Not so well-known is his conversion from the old Christian view that heretics and schismatics should be countered with argument only, to the view that they should be coerced; this was now possible, since the civil power was Christian. In common with the early Fathers, the younger Augustine had believed in the freedom of faith, and once wrote that "no man can believe unless he wants to." /21 But later on considering Luke 14,23 - "compel them to come in" - he developed the theory of what he called beneficial coercion and good persecution. /22

Thereby Augustine helped to provide the theoretical basis for the full blown intolerance of the Church in the future. To be fair, his thinking was conditioned largely by the social and political disruption caused by Donatist terrorism. The consequence was that heresy became criminalized. In Imperial Law it was equated with treason and liable to capital punishment, /23 but only in so far as it posed a threat to social stability. That limitation was clearly understood by both the Church and the legislators. No one argued that plain dogmatic deviants should be put to death. And in fact, in the old Imperial Christian era, judicial execution of heretics almost never took place. This aversion to heretic-killing testifies in part to the measure of the New Testament, - but also to the dominance of allegorical exegesis, with its Platonist thrust to spiritualization.

In the mediaeval period, the chief advance was that the execution of heretics ipso facto became the norm. The development of the single organic unit of "Christendom" with its increased approximation to Old Testament conceptions favoured this development. /24 So also did the traumas of the violent struggle with the Cathars and Albigensians. The principal theoretician of mediaeval practice was Thomas. His formulation is clear-cut: "The secular power has the right to execute heretics, even if they are no danger to others, because they are blasphemers of God in following false doctrine". /25 This meant that heresy had no longer to be accompanied by treasonous rebellion to qualify for incineration. This was also connected with Thomas' virus theory of heresy. The virus of heresy in any individual must be



quickly destroyed (that is, the individual must be corporally destroyed), lest the people succumb to an epidemic and end up en masse in Hell. Ecclesiastes 8,11 came to mind. Intolerance of proven heresy was now absolute. On this basis the various inquisitions operated.

When the Reformation came along, the question of toleration dramatically re-emerged. The early works of Luther and Zwingli seem to advocate toleration. Luther's principal theme of Christian liberty, his concept of faith as voluntary trust, his initial rejection of state competence in spiritual affairs, his appeal to (Christian) conscience, his rejection of capital punishment for heresy etc., all seemed to herald a radical break with the past. This was short-lived. To his own consternation, Luther's early theology opened up a Pandora's box of all sorts of prophets, free spirits, super-pietists, and revolutionary fanatics. The Reformers quickly back-pedalled. The toleration they had sought for themselves they now denied to others including adherents of the Old Church. The outcome - influenced by Ephesians 4, 5 - was that territorial confessional apartheid was imposed on Europe as a solution to the religious question. Within each territory then, Protestant and Catholic, formal substantive intolerance was practised in the traditional mediaeval manner.

There was a remarkable Anabaptist spiritualist writer called Sebastian Franck. His solution to the religious problem was that all churches should be abolished so that true religion should be abolished. One of his admirers was Castellio. Franck's analysis of what was happening to the Reformation movement was apposite. He wrote: 'Formerly some wrote well on the subject of Christian liberty. That was because they were in danger. But now that this liberty has become an embarrassment to them, they have put the old shoe on again and sing the old song. From Christ they return to Moses, from the sun to the shadow.' /26

And Castellio's cri-de-coeur in the quotation given at the start is also an authentic contemporary lamentation over the way the Reformation was developing. If the mediaeval Church certainly liquidated heretics, it was not very often, and they tended to be isolated individuals. But in the Reformation era, things were moving in the direction of mass killings, especially of Anabaptists, and then later of Catholics and Protestants in religious wars and battles. Castellio's attitude was typical of a strain within Christian humanism

which asserted that life has precedence over doctrine, that right behaviour is more pertinent than right thinking, that people should be judged by ethical and not dogmatic criteria. Erasmus had done much to propagate this way of thinking, even if his conscience submitted to the authority of the Roman Church. 'He will not break a bruised reed, or snuff out a smouldering wick' (Is. 42,3) was a favourite text of such Christian humanists. /27 How can it be possible, they asked, that people who justify or condone division, strife, religious crime and murder have anything resembling a good theology? It has to be said that behind this way of thinking lies - dogmatically speaking - a reductionist theology. Castellio and his likes found that the churches were most militant on matters on which the Bible was most obscure, which meant large areas of traditional or Reformation Christian doctrine. They argued that what was 'essential' on 'matters of faith' was far too broadly conceived. Christians are battling over human opinions and are not content with the limited but sufficient divine revelation in the moral law and Christ, over which there is an unanimity. And so dogmatic totalitarianism is a travesty of Christianity.

As indicated, on the occasion of Servetus' execution there was a flurry of literary activity between the Genevans and Castellio on the question of executing heretics, though Castellio used a pseudonym. Just as Castellio's book appeared in 1554 /28, Calvin published his 'Defence of the Orthodox Faith'. This was a point by point refutation of Servetus, but his preface is a systematic and cogent apology for intolerance. /29 There is nothing especially original, still less 'Calvinist' about it. It is simply a restatement of traditional Catholic belief and practice, and includes the virus theory of Thomas. 'We must resist the temptation to be influenced by feelings of humanity in these matters', he says, 'Away with hesitant spirits who prefer Gamaliel to Nebuchadnezzar, for they will only lead us to satanic anarchy'. /30 And it was Calvin's book which received acclaim rather than Castellio's.

The onus of replying to Castellio fell to Calvin's colleague and later successor, Théodore de Bèze. /31 Castellio meanwhile composed a reply to Calvin, /32 but it was not published until the next century in Holland. He also wrote an answer to de Bèze. This was published in Geneva, but not until 1971. /33

Castellio's published book on the treatment of heretics takes the form of a florilegium or anthology of texts of theologians ancient and modern. These texts argue explicitly or implicitly against the killing of heretics. He admits that nearly all the moderns have now retracted their opinions, which they expressed when they were under the threat of persecution. Ironically, Castellio manages to scrape up a few passages from the early Calvin. This has provoked a modern commentator to remark that if Calvin ever wrote anything in favour of religious liberty, it must have been a typographical error. /34

A few quotations from Castellio should illustrate the flavour of his thinking: 'To kill someone does not mean vindicating a doctrine, it means killing a human being ... the truth of an argument is not enhanced by steel or fire.' /35 In line with his claim that the true Church is the oppressed Church, he states: 'If those who are persecuted are blessed, how can those who persecute be blessed?' /36 He attacks what he sees as a double standard in established Christianity. It represses doctrinal error by force, yet is lax on the seven deadly sins. Why is one form of alleged blasphemy so severely punished, and another form tolerated? Is not moral hypocrisy blasphemous? And he notes: 'We have whole cities full of blaspheming drunkards, and it is hard to tell if they are more addicted to drink than to blasphemy. If it is blasphemy, why are they not put to death?' /37

Castellio's basic thesis is that the divine moral law has been unambiguously revealed and is unanimously accepted. On everything else, except the existence of God and the life of Christ, there is no accord, since scripture is obscure or uncertain. Often then mere human opinions are confused with divine revelation. And so liberty of opinion is wrongfully criminalized.

The reply of Beza to points like these was not accommodating 'This is the work of a godless (sic) blasphemer ... whose mind is perverted by a diabolical and unchristian love', he affirms. /38 If God's majesty is to be honoured, monsters in human form must be killed. Freedom of speech and action is worse than dictatorship - it means disrespect for the Word of God and church order. This is the worst possible crime for which no punishment is severe enough. Cruelty? - Beza asks with genuine sincerity, - what is half an hour's burning compared to the

eternal fire of Hell? Beza's wrath is determined by the fact that he was alert enough to see that ultimately Castellio posed a threat to the basic formal principle of the Reformation, namely the authority of scripture alone: 'On what basis can the Church exist if the firmness of the word be removed by someone who would make it too obscure for settling religious controversies?' /39

Lastly, in his later years Castellio composed his final unpublished work, a more speculative affair entitled: 'On Doubt and Belief, Ignorance and Knowledge'. /40 This certainly substantiates the suspicion of the Genevans that Castellio did not subscribe to the dogmatic basis of the Reformation. Some typical remarks in this work are as follows: 'The more one knows the truth, the less one wants to damn the others.' 'It is liars who strive after meticulous verbal consistency to hide their ignorance.' 'If only Christians had greater capacity for self-doubt, there would be less religious crime.' /41

Significantly, Castellio attacks implicitly Reformation hermeneutics and the dominant Augustinian anthropology. He says that the canons with which scriptural truth should be determined are not scripture itself, not the Church, not the Spirit nor any combination of these three, but morality and reason. To assert as the Reformers do, he argues, that reason (flesh) is incorrigibly corrupt and incapacitated means two things: 1) it disowns 'the daughter of God' /42 and 2) it compels the Churches to accord the status of divine revelation to their doctrines, and so endow them with infallible authority.

That was Sebastian Castellio. He was one of history's misfits and failures in terms of his own times. Failures usually do not make history, since history usually prefers success stories. From many points of view Castellio is open to criticism, and he was a representative of what might be called Christian subterranean thought, stigmatized by the various orthodoxies as simply unchristian and apostatical. Such a way of thinking could until modern times only be marginal, since by its very nature it could not seek power and authority. The temptation to read any of his writings could be reinforced by the maxim of Sebastian Franck: 'No book can be bad enough that good Christians cannot profit from it.' /43

Notes

1. Or 'Châteillon'.
2. La Bible nouvellement translátée par Sebastion Chatellion. Basle 1555. Preface, f. \*2r.
3. Ibid., f. \*2v.
4. The standard work on the subject is:  
J. Lecler SJ, Toleration and the Reformation. 2 vols.  
Translated from French original (1955) by T.L. Westow.  
New York, London 1960.
5. Cf. Jer.2, 9ff. Is.2. Acts 17,22-31
6. F. Buisson, Sébastien Castellion. Sa vie et son oeuvre  
(1515-1563). 2 vols. Paris 1892.
7. Concerning Heretics. Pseud. (Sebastion Castellio).  
Ed. R.H. Bainton.  
Records of Civilization, vol. 22. New York 1935.  
(Quoted: Bainton ed.).
8. See M. Lienhard, Glaube und Skepsis im 16. Jahrhundert. In: Bauer  
Reich und Reformation. Festschrift für G. Franz. Ed. P. Blickle.  
Stuttgart 1982. Esp. pp.179-181.
9. Geneva 1543
10. The book was translated into English twice in the 18th century.  
Cf. Buisson, op.cit.2, p.352.
11. Biblia, interprete Sebastiano Castalio. Basle 1551.
12. See note 2.
13. Cf. F.Wendek. Calvin. The Origins and Development of his  
Religicus Thought. Translated from French original (1950)  
by P. Mairet. London 1965. Pp. 82-83.

14. Cf. Corpus Reformatorum, op. Calvini 11, pp. 674-676.  
Cf. Buisson, op. cit. 2, p.352.
15. De Haereticis an sint Persequendi. S.1. 1554. engl. in Bainton ed.,pp.121-253.
16. E.g.: Lev.24, 15-16. Num.25, 1-5. Deut.13, 2-16; 17,2-7.  
1 Kings 18,21-40. Zech.13,3.
17. Cf. J.W. Baker, Henry Bullinger and the Covenant. The Other Reformed Tradition. Athens, Ohio 1980. Pp. 92-93.
18. Matt. 13,24-30; 36-43.
19. Cf. R.H. Houston, The Parable of the Tares as the proof-text for Religious Liberty to the end of the 16th Century.  
Church History 1, 1932, pp.67-88.
20. Ad Scapulam, cap.22. Patrologia latina, ed. Migne, vol.1, col 699.
21. 'Credere non potest homo nisi volens'. In Joannem 26, nr.2.  
Patrologia latina, ed. Migne, vol.35, col.1607.
22. Epistle 185,11. Ibid., vol.33, col.797.
23. In the year 407. Theodosian Code 16,5,40.
24. 'Ecclesia et imperium est unum et idem'. Monumenta Germanica  
Historica, Constitutiones et Acta 2, p.63.
25. Sentences IV, d.13, q.2, a.3, sol. Cf. Summa th.II,2, q.11, a.3.
26. Bainton ed., p.191.
27. Cf. Matt. 12, 18-20.
28. Cf. n. 15.
29. Corpus Reformatorum, op. Calvini 8, col. 461-481.

30. Ibid., cols. 471, 472-473, 474-475.
31. De haereticis a civili magistratu puniendis ... Geneva 1554.
32. Contra libellum Calvinii. 1612.
33. De haereticis ... non puniendis. Ed. R. Bekker and M. F. Valkoff. Travaux d'Humanisme et de Renaissance 118. Geneva 1971.
34. Bainton ed. p.74.
35. Ibid. p.271.
36. Ibid. p.222.
37. Ibid. p.229.
38. See Lecler, op. cit. pp.274-275.
39. Op.cit. pp.66.
40. De arte dubitandi et confitendi ignorandi et sciendi. Ed. Elisabeth Hirsch. Studies in Mediaeval and Reformation Thought 29. Leiden 1981. English extracts in Bainton ed., pp.287-305.
41. Bainton ed., p.288 ff.
42. Ibid., p.297.
43. Ibid.,p.188.