

Michael Servetus : Champion of Humanism and Freedom of Conscience

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Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.

Thomas Jefferson, 1 January 1802

Letter of reply to the Danbury Association

The Genius of Servetus

There is no figure in the history of ideas who would match the breadth and scope of Michael Servetus's outlook and importance for the evolution of culture in Western Europe. He was a lonely scholar and a bold mind who brought together what was best in the cultural renewal of the Renaissance and in the attempt at the moral renewal programmed by those who came to be called Radical Reformers.

He discovered through the study of the bible, which was made possible by the Reformation trends that its truth contrasted with official Christian practice and official doctrinal formulations. He saw that Christianity was corrupt morally and

ideologically, and, inspired by the rising spirit of the reform, he envisioned a plan to restore Christianity to its original simplicity and integrity as suggested by Erasmus.

The genius of Michael Servetus extends to many fields of human endeavor: jurisprudence, mathematics, geography, astrology, philosophy, medicine, theology, and biblical criticism. Several scholars¹ succinctly described his role in the history of human thought. The German theologian Adolf von Harnack thus described the importance of Servetus's thought: "The representative of the most remarkable union of the two tendencies – speculative mysticism and cold rationalism – was Michael Servetus, the Spanish thinker who is distinguished also for his profound piety. In him was found the fusion of all that was best in sixteenth century development if one puts aside the evangelical Reformation. Servetus equally distinguished himself as a learned experimenter, as a critical thinker, as a speculative philosopher, and as a Christian reformer in the best sense of the word."² Auguste Dide, the French Senator and president of the International Committee for the Monument to Michael Servetus, in his inaugural speech at the unveiling of a statue to Servetus in Annemasse in 1908 said: "The day when Servetus, tortured, captive, and facing death, opposed the arrogant absolutism and pride of his persecutors and executioners, with the doctrine of the never ending progress, Servetus placed himself in league with the emancipators who would create a new secular Europe and who prepared the French Revolution."³ At the same ceremony, professor of philosophy Otto Karmin said: "Amidst the most inhuman sufferings, he affirmed the principles of free thought which have triumphed since and the principle of free belief which became the Magna Charta of the Unitarian Protestants and of the liberal churches. These churches live by the doctrines for which Servetus sacrificed his life."⁴ Professor Ángel Alcalá, the translator of *Christianismi restitutio* into Spanish (*Restitución del Cristianismo*), calls Servetus the author of "one of the most original books that have ever been written."⁵ José Barón Fernández⁶ acknowledges Servetus's singular role in history by the fact that he was burned in effigy by the Catholic Inquisition at Vienne and

alive by the Protestant Calvinists at Geneva. Such a circumstance did not befall any other dissenter persecuted for theological ideas.

Undoubtedly the title of his major work *The Restoration of Christianity* is reminiscent of the proposal by Erasmus (1466-1536) which was based on three major premises:⁷ 1. studying the original texts of the Gospels, the first apostolic writings, and the first Christian theologians still operating in the Greco-Roman social paradigm as the source of religious assertions; 2. that sophisticated theological speculations should be abandoned; 3. that this was necessary in order to reduce the religious beliefs to a small number of fundamental and essential doctrines.

While Erasmus satisfied his interests with philological studies and made no effort at reforming the old system of thought, Servetus, in the realm of intellectual inquiry, demanded a radical reevaluation of the entire ideological religious system of assertions and dogmas imposed on Western Europe since the fourth century. Servetus's theological inquiry initiated the study of scriptural tradition in an attempt to uncover the real religious doctrines contained in it. In the process he developed a new more humane religion and a new understanding of divinity and divine matters closer to the realities of the human condition. It evolved eventually into biblical Unitarianism and in modern times into Universalist Unitarianism. This is one major legacy⁸ of Servetus which is important for the evolution of religion. At the intellectual level it led to the development of critical biblical studies and to comparative studies of religions of the nineteenth century with great consequences for the modern understanding of religion. Today biblical scholars confirm the discovery of Servetus and his universal understanding of the divinity which breaks with tribal or ecclesiastical particularism.⁹ Philosophers and religious scholars develop further the Servetian understanding of the divinity which manifests itself and evolves in a historical process in the new concepts of process theology.¹⁰ Others, however, reject the ontological concept of divinity but recognize the importance of human values and

make them the center of a true religion, a religion of the “Highest Values” as the one propounded by a philosopher of religion, Stanisław Cieniawa.¹¹

The other legacy has been consequential for the development of the Enlightenment and recovery of the ancient humanistic social paradigm. It concerns the function of society at the moral level. Servetus recognized the full potential of human nature, its capabilities and rationality. Thus he demanded freedom of intellectual inquiry, thought, conscience, and expression that was denied to millions on doctrinal theological grounds. At the same time he remained deeply devotional. He believed in a personal divinity to whom access was granted to every believer without an ecclesiastical intermediary. By his sacrifice Servetus set into motion a process of change in the entire social paradigm and recovery of the long lost humanistic principles.

Establishment of an Ecclesiastical Paradigm.

Servetus’s role as a central figure in history who initiated the process of recovering the social humanistic paradigm becomes obvious if we put it in a historical perspective. Greco-Roman society tolerated all religions and did not impose restrictions on free thought. Acts of intolerance were rare, and if they occurred, they were never justified by deviations from one doctrine or another. This was due to the lack of a state religion and a state sanctioned theological doctrine, though the people and the centers of power were highly religious. All this was dramatically changed with the advent of state supported Christianity. From the fourth century, Christianity became an institution of organized clergy and was fused with the political power of the Roman Empire and later in the rest of Western Europe.¹² Profession of religious, mythical beliefs became the touchstone of morality, reversing the humanistic principles of ancient morality. The ecclesiastical hierarchy became a political party and the secular state power became its executive branch. Laws were introduced that legalized religious, dogmatic assertions, imposed obligatory adherence, and prohibited any deviation in thought.

The Emperors Valentinian II and Theodosius I established on February 28, 380, the Christian religion of the Roman pontiff as obligatory in the Empire declaring those who would not embrace it “demented and insane,” and therefore, “shall be smitten first by divine vengeance and second by the retribution of Our own initiative, which We shall assume in accordance with the divine judgment” (*Codex Theodosius* 16.1.2). This decree may be considered an official declaration of the first forced adherence to a state religion and the official initiation of persecutions for the convictions of conscience.

In a short span of time Christian emperors accomplished the elimination of free thought and the imposition of a totalitarian theocratic system so that they could congratulate themselves in 423 on a job well done:

The regulations of constitutions formerly promulgated shall suppress any pagans who survive, although We now believe that there are none [left] (*Cod. Theod.* 16.10.22).

Constantine the Great issued an edict against “pagans” on September 1, 326 and persecuted “heretics” and schismatics from the beginning. The fundamental principle on which the persecution was based was deviation from the official state religion. Heresy was considered “a public crime, since whatever is committed against divine religion amounts to the detriment of all” (*Cod. Theod.* 16.5.38-39). The definition of a “heretic” left no doubt that a theocratic society could not tolerate any free thought:

Those persons who may be discovered to deviate, even in a minor point of doctrine, from the tenets and path of the Catholic religion are included under the designation of heretics and must be subject to the sanctions which have been issued against them (Arcadius and Honorius, September 3, 395; *Cod. Theod.* 16.5.28).

In the sixth century Emperor Justinian incorporated explicitly the Catholic creed, including the doctrine of the Trinity, into Roman state law.¹³ Chapter 1 of

Book I, entitled *De Trinitate et Fide catholica*, confirms establishing the Catholic faith as the official state religion and forbids any critical thought under penalty of being burned at the stake. Justinian defines faith in the Trinity in terms of the Nicæan creed (“trinitatem consubstantialem”), and ordains that any deviation from it should be punished as well as any so-called heretical views. It is interesting too, that the law promulgated in 413 declares the death penalty for the crime of rebaptism.

Thus in the fourth century a switch took place in the social paradigm, if we may borrow the concept from the history of science,¹⁴ from the humanistic principles of ancient morality to the new ecclesiastical one. The social paradigm can be defined as an entire constellation of beliefs, values, and a worldview which is shared by the community and has a normative character. Initially it was imposed forcefully by the emperor and formulated by the clergy; later it became a tradition established by a system of laws (state and ecclesiastical), and theological doctrines (e.g., the doctrines of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas).¹⁵

Theological Doctrine of Persecution and its Evolution

Since the second century church fathers developed the theological doctrine of persecution culminating in the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas. He differentiated between unbelievers, heretics, and apostates: “...the faithful, if they are able, should compel them not to hinder the faith whether by their blasphemies or evil persecutions or even open persecutions. It is for this reason that Christ’s faithful often wage war on the infidels, not indeed for the purpose of forcing them to believe, ... but for the purpose of stopping them obstructing the faith of Christ...”¹⁶ And concerning the heretics he justifies their violent extermination:

With regard to heretics there are two points to be observed, one on their side, the other on the side of the Church. As for heretics their sin deserves banishment, not only from the Church by excommunication, but also from this world by death. To corrupt the faith, whereby the soul lives, is much graver than to counterfeit

money, which supports temporal life. Since forgers and other malefactors are summarily condemned to death by the civil authorities with much more reason, may heretics as soon as they are convicted of heresy be not only excommunicated but also justly be put to death.¹⁷

Aquinas uses the parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:27-30) for the theological and biblical justification of extermination as a command by Christ himself: “Yet if heretic be altogether uprooted by death, this is not contrary to our Lord’s command, which is to be understood of a case when the tares could not be weeded without uprooting the wheat.” For Aquinas “the disbelief is greater than other sins which occur in the perversion of morals,” “it is the worst of all sins ... resistance to the things of faith ... is a most grave sin.”¹⁸ Though acceptance of faith was to be free, once faith was accepted, even if through baptism of an infant, one was obliged to keep it as a matter of moral obligation, just like in the Islamic *sharia*. This is not changed even today. The Catholic position on freedom of conscience was explicitly and succinctly formulated by the director of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, before he became the present Pope Benedict XVI, in the following way:

The freedom of the act of faith cannot justify a right to dissent. This freedom does not indicate freedom with regard to the truth, but signifies the free determination of the person in conformity with his moral obligations to accept the truth.¹⁹

This implies that though one is free to accept the doctrines of the church, it is at the same time a moral obligation to accept them and one does not have the freedom to question or reject them. Therefore, freedom cannot be expressed except through submission.

The church practiced compulsory conversions and baptism wherever it was in power to impose its rule. The preservation of the church doctrine and the new social paradigm was scrupulously supervised by the ecclesiastical authority, institutions (e.g., infant baptism, canon law), and courts (e.g., Inquisition).²⁰

This ecclesiastical state reached its peak during the Middle Ages and lasted for about fifteen centuries.²¹ Opponents were punished – too often by death, torture, and confiscation of property – their only "crime" being that of daring to speak out against the scheme imposed by an ecclesiastical party. In this theocratic society bloody persecution of any deviation in thought was declared a moral virtue and a divine command.

Freedom of religion was slowly recognized in many countries after the Reformation as going against the teaching and practice of the Catholic and Protestant churches.²² This freedom became guaranteed in most of the Western countries and upheld by practically all political ideologies. The church is the last organization to recognize freedom of religion, however severely limited, for tactical reasons only, after almost fifteen centuries. One of the most important acts of the Vatican II Council (1962-1965) is undoubtedly the Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae Personae*).²³

The council formally recognized by its declaration the validity of the principle and removed in theory a long-held ambiguity in the standards of freedom: "The Church does not deal with the secular order in terms of a double standard - freedom for the Church when Catholics are a minority, privilege for the Church and intolerance for others when Catholics are a majority." It also asserted that "the dignity of man consists in his responsible use of freedom," but affirmed this freedom in very narrow Catholic terms.

The declaration is only a partial recognition of the processes that developed outside the sphere of the Catholic church control such as the rejection of a religious worldview imposed by a religious organization, the rise in man's personal consciousness and awareness of his personal dignity, and the rise in political consciousness and aspiration to live in a free society under a limited government with the freedom to exercise any religion. These realizations resulted from the moral and political progress against the doctrines and desires of the church, in a struggle with the brutal repression organized by the church over centuries, and were formally expressed as civil law in the American Bill of Rights

ratified by the United States on December 15, 1791. President Franklin Roosevelt called this law "the great American charter of personal liberty and human dignity."²⁴ The principle cherished by the American Constitution and free world is, however, different from the principle finally adopted by the church.

The church defines religious freedom only in terms of absence of coercion:

This Vatican Synod declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits. The Synod further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person, as this dignity is known through the revealed Word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed. This it is to become a civil right.

The essence of this conciliar statement is freedom from coercion. Even atheists, according to the Catholic commentator of this declaration, have the right to be free of coercion in matters religious. However, Vatican II does not show any tolerance or respect for atheism which "must be accounted among the most serious problems of this age" and calling it in an official church document in quite an un-Christian manner "these poisonous doctrines." Characteristic is the change in the attitude towards other Christians:

But in subsequent centuries more widespread disagreements appeared and quite large communities became separated from full communion with the Catholic Church – developments for which, at

times, men on both sides were to blame. However, one cannot impute the sin of separation to those who at present are born into these communities and are instilled therein with Christ's faith. The Catholic Church accepts them with respect and affection as brothers. For men who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into a certain, though imperfect communion with the Catholic Church. (*Document* p. 345)

For the first time in history other Christians are called "brothers." Their religion in the previous papal documents used to be described as "that perverted religion." But there is still explicit an expression of guilt and sin by the "heretics" in the past, the supremacy of the pope over all Christians, and the necessity of joining the Catholic church for salvation: "It is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the all-embracing means of salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained." The document also states: "Respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political, and religious matters too." And further: "The right of free assembly, of common action, of expressing personal opinions, and of professing a religion both privately and publicly" (*Gaudium et Spes*, art 28).

For the first time the church repeats some statements of the truth known long ago to the ancient people, and rediscovered by church reformers, Servetus, Castellio, the Socinians, and later by Locke, Bayle, Voltaire etc. This is a 180-degree turn from the previous position of the church as formulated by Thomas Aquinas, who also based his claim on the same Word of God. According to Aquinas, Divine Law granted theoretical freedom from coercion only to unbaptized believers in non-Christian religions. The Catholic commentator further falsely claims that the Declaration on Religious Freedom is in accordance with the First Amendment to the American Constitution in an obvious subterfuge to hide the real intentions of the church. The First Amendment clearly forbids the establishment of a national church, recognized, supported, sponsored or otherwise privileged by the state. Therefore, it leaves to the individual his own opinion and

choice. The Catholic church, however, has never recognized the separation of church and state.

The Vatican II position is merely a change in tactics since the church lost most of its traditional influence and power. The church still maintains its old dogma of exclusivity as representing the only true religion. It still maintains that it is a moral obligation of man and society to accept the Catholic church and its religion. It only restrains itself today from the use of coercion:

We believe that this one true religion subsists in the Catholic and apostolic church, to which the Lord Jesus committed the duty of spreading it abroad among all men....

And,

This sacred Synod likewise professes its belief that it is upon the human conscience that these obligations fall and exert their binding force. The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power. Religious freedom, in turn, which men demand as necessary to fulfill their duty to worship God, has to do with immunity from coercion in civil society. Therefore, it leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ.

Moreover,

In the formation of their conscience, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church.

The same was proclaimed by the Vatican I Council:

In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent of soul. This religious submission of will and mind must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex*

cathedra. That is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will.... The individual bishop can proclaim Christ's doctrine infallibly (quoted p. 48 in Vatican II *Document*).

The Code of Canon Law maintains the same church doctrine:

In virtue of his office the Supreme Pontiff is infallible in his teaching when as chief Shepherd and Teacher of all Christ's faithful, with the duty of strengthening his brethren in the faith, he proclaims by definitive act a doctrine to be held concerning faith or morals (Canon 749, # 1).

Section # 2 of the same Canon states: "The College of Bishops also possess infallibility in its teaching ... exercising their magisterium as teachers and judges of faith and morals...."

The most revealing is Canon 752:

While the assent of faith is not required, a religious submission of intellect and will is to be given to any doctrine which either the Supreme Pontiff or the College of Bishops, declares as a matter of faith or morals, even though they do not intend to proclaim that doctrine by definitive act.

Thus freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, and freedom of inquiry are still denied by the church. The church took only a more realistic position in a situation where it does not have enough power to impose its rule by force.

Let's make no mistake, in spite of all attempts at reconciliation with the rest of the world, the church still claims that the whole world must be christianized and incorporated into the dominion of the Catholic church:

All must be converted to Him [i.e. Jesus] as He is made known by the Church's preaching. All must be incorporated into Him by baptism, and into the Church which is His body.

And,

The whole human race is to form one people of God, coalesce into the one body of Christ, and be built up into one temple of the Holy Spirit. (Mission, *Ad Gentes*, p. 593 ff)

In light of such statements, the *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, though for the first time in history reconciliatory, with all its patronizing statements that the church respects the spiritual, moral, and cultural values of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, becomes empty and almost farcical. In the statement related to the Jews, the church repudiated persecutions done in the past, but did not admit any moral guilt!

This sacred Synod wishes to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit above all of biblical studies, and of brotherly dialogues.

Vatican II deals with the question of Jewish guilt for Christ's death, always exploited by the church, thus:

True, authorities of the Jews and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today ... the Jews should not be presented as repudiated or cursed by God, as if such views followed from the holy Scriptures. The Church repudiates all persecutions against any man. Moreover, mindful of her common patrimony with the Jews, and motivated by the gospel, spiritual love and by no political considerations, she deplores the hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any source.

There is also a camouflaged reference to the conversion of the Jews: "Jews are special to God. The church awaits that day ... on which all people will address the Lord in a single voice and 'serve him with one accord'." In practical terms, the church changed the liturgy: the prayer "For the conversion of the Jews" was changed into the prayer "For the Jews." The Congregation of Rites also

issued a declaration banning further veneration of Simon of Trent, a small boy who, the church claimed, was murdered by Jews in 1475 in order that his Christian blood might be used in the synagogue during the Passover.²⁵

The commentator on the *Declaration on Religious Freedom* claims further that religious freedom as a requirement of human dignity “came to be more adequately known to human reason through centuries of experience” with roots in the divine revelation. Making reference to the First Amendment, he claims that religious freedom as a principle and as a legal institution is less than two hundred years old. Only through experience did the exigencies of human dignity disclose themselves to reason.

There are two grave errors in this statement. First, it is precisely by divine revelation and Divine Law that Aquinas justified the execution of millions of people. Second the principle of religious freedom was not discovered two hundred years ago. It was known to ancient people who lived in religious harmony before the advent of state Catholicism in the fourth century. It is precisely the church that destroyed this principle when it dominated and controlled the state. The principle was later formulated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in a struggle against the repression unleashed by the church. Though there were some voices early in the history of the church defending freedom from coercion to a faith, they were defending the freedom of the Christian rites, especially their antisocial doctrines, and they were expressed at a time when the church did not have power in the society. Moreover, these voices never constituted any official church doctrine but only private opinions. Defending freedom from coercion, these first apologists did not defend their own religious freedom, which they always had, but their freedom from the requirement of demonstrating one's political loyalty.

It is important to emphasize, however, that neither the violent persecution practiced from the fourth century nor the Inquisition introduced in the thirteenth century have any New Testamental or theological justification. The Catholic church, and the Protestant churches as well, nevertheless, attempted, by twisting the meaning of certain selected parables (e.g. Matt. 13:30; Luke 14:23), to use

them for justification. The same cannot be said about ancient Judaism and Islam whose scriptures provide ample evidence of propounding religious violence. Paul proclaimed “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” Faith will provide protection and the weapon to fight the influence of others; “With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”²⁶ Against the people who had different beliefs (at that time they were Jews and were *causing divisions*) Paul had only this advice: “But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions (*hereticum hominem*), since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned.”²⁷ Later this term *heretics*, meaning etymologically divisive persons, was applied to all those who were not aligned with the church ideology and made their own choices or developed their own interpretations. Belief was a matter of a voluntary acceptance which Thomas Aquinas also confirmed. Thus the violent persecutions initiated since the fourth century and the violent laws introduced in the Roman society were a result of the perversion of the original Christian faith, of the fusion of the secular power of the state with the spiritual authority of the religious leaders.

Similarly only through the distorted interpretation of selected New Testament texts could the church justify the Inquisition. The peak of arrogance and absurdity was reached by Luis de Páramo in his *De origine et progressu Officii Sanctae Inquisitionis, eiusque, dignitate et utilitate* (Madrid, 1598). He claimed that God was the first inquisitor by dealing with Adam and Eve and showing the procedure to be followed by the inquisitors of heresy. Even the *sambenito* has the divine origin in the coverings of fur which God sent to Adam and Eve by his mercy. Moreover, the confiscation of goods of the prisoners has an origin in the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise and depriving them of their material goods. The Inquisition thus was established already from the time

of Adam and Eve. According to him the church had the right to send heretics to be burned at the stake which derives from the punishment by fire the apostles requested for the Samaritans (Luke 9:55) and from the words of Jesus himself when he cursed the tree not producing fruit: “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”²⁸

The Reformation

The Reformation arose in the sixteenth century aiming at correcting financial abuses of the ecclesiastical institution and a competition for political power by local centers.²⁹ It brought also new trends: the assertion of the individual, personal experience as a basis for religion, and an emphasis on biblical studies. It also underscored the need for tolerance, at least in the initial phase, for its own survival. Unfortunately, as soon as the “reformed” churches gained independence they, too, quickly became as intolerant as the old Roman church and ossified into the old dogmatic tradition. There were a few leaders of liberal religious thought who opposed the moral corruption and power of the popes and the clergy, though any real investigation of the accepted dogmatic assertions was persecuted by both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.³⁰ Protestants accepted the theological arguments of the Catholic church for the persecution of those who differed in their views based on the Hebrew Laws expressed in the book of Deuteronomy. The so-called heretics, apostates, and non-believers were considered sinners of the highest degree and their punishment was justified by a wide range of arguments ranging from the political necessity of maintaining unity of the church and state to the vindication of God’s honor.

The only reformers who defended religious freedom were members of the Radical Reformation movement who argued for tolerance, mostly on the political level, of religious minorities. The most prominent among them were Anabaptists who rejected infant baptism, the oath, a paid ministry, legal suits, military service,

and a union of church and state. They were regarded as a menace to society – ecclesiastical and political.

Church and state were considered indivisible in both Catholic and Protestant areas. Any deviation from the established churches was considered a crime of treason. Rebaptism, sedition, anarchy, blasphemy, sacrilege, and hypocrisy were lumped together indiscriminately under the label of treason. Often there was not the slightest symbol of justice in the treatment of the accused. Frequently an accusation of Anabaptism was tantamount to condemnation. Imprisonment and torture were normally followed by death. Drowning, sword, and stake were all used to exterminate the hated movement.³¹

Anabaptists were convinced that a worldly authority does not have power over the religion of its subjects and if they are to be brought to consensus this should be done only through spiritual means. Such a view was postulated by a Baptist scholar, Balthasar Hübmaier (1480-1528).³² He wrote the treatise, *Concerning Heretics and Those Who Burn Them* (1524), defending the complete freedom of religion. He argued that the Gospel precludes coercion and claimed that the state has no jurisdiction in religious matters. He extended liberty even to law-abiding atheists, “It is well and good that the secular authority puts to death the criminals who do physical harm to the defenseless, Romans 13. But no one may injure the atheist who wishes nothing for himself other than to forsake the gospel.” Another prominent representative of the Radical Reformation was Sebastian Franck (1499-1542), a German independent preacher and spiritualist who, for the first time, expressed the idea that only God knows who the heretic is, and who granted everybody universal tolerance, even to the unbelievers.³³

The Role and Humanism of Servetus

The pivotal event in the history of Europe which brought to the fore the absurdity and moral turpitude of the whole ecclesiastical paradigm was the case of our lonely scholar. It does not mean that there were no voices even before the Reformation arguing for religious tolerance.³⁴ For the early humanists the model of argumentation was the Erasmian hope for a religious consensus based on the reduction of theological assertions to an essential minimum. Servetus's role, however, is unique because of the depth of his humanism and the historical circumstances of his martyrdom. The solitary figure of Michael Servetus stands out on the historical background as the one who dared to analyze afresh accepted dogmas and the authority of ancient creeds and medieval theologians. The Christianity Servetus found in his lifetime had little in common with the scripture and its practice produced disastrous results in societies. He was primarily a biblical scholar and dared to question fundamental religious premises and single-handedly developed an alternative Christianity closer to the letter and spirit of the scripture. He also combined his religious doctrine with the naturalistic world view of his time in a unifying system of thought. He was unequalled in his time and remains one of the greatest minds in human history, one who contributed to universal culture.

With the rediscovery of humanism in the first half of the fifteenth century, Servetus became one of its most prominent representatives. His understanding of humanism was much more profound than the one propagated by the Renaissance humanists who were focused primarily on the study of ancient literature and culture, and limited to the secular interests in everyday life. They still retained a religious condemnation of human nature. The humanism of Servetus went much deeper as he understood it as a defense of human dignity, liberty, and potential for self-redemption through the good works which were to be the highest values in Christian life. He remained a deeply religious person with Christ as the central motif of his existence and guide for his personal and professional conduct.

Man, according to Servetus, occupies a special place in the world. His soul is produced by inspiration of the divine element and mixing with the elements of blood. All this is in accordance with Plato's contention that man is made of a mixture of the elements and the substance of divinity and with the views of Trismegistus that man was born of divine substance, the light, and life.³⁵ Even more, making reference to Pythagoras and to Philo of Alexandria, Servetus claimed that man is basically divine: "Philo says in the book *On Agriculture* that the soul of man was made with the image of the Word serving as an exemplar Therefore man was made after the example, form, and figure of Christ, in body and in soul."³⁶ Man is analogous to Christ in composition. The spirit of man is a hypostasis of the Spirit of God, so man is a hypostasis of the Word of God, and both communicate with us. Servetus's insistence on our closeness to God, even after the Fall, is the most outstanding characteristic of Servetus's humanism and differentiates him from other humanists. God still communicates with us and this is done through the natural physiological process.³⁷ This is an innate gift of grace available to all humans. From such an understanding of a natural physiological process comes Servetus's interest in pulmonary circulation.

Servetus placed great value on human natural spontaneity, reason, and capability to do good works, and through this he emphasized human dignity and autonomy in moral decisions. Catholics could not agree with him because he eliminated the role of the church and the papacy for justification and salvation, and Protestants disagreed with his concept of faith and accepting the works of love. Though he states that faith is first a precondition of secondary grace, he confirms that love is the greatest and supports this statement with several arguments. "Faith then, to conclude, if considered in its pure and essential property, does not contain such perfection as love ... Love is superior to everything ... durable, sublime, more resembling God, and closer to the perfection of the future age."³⁸ Here Servetus followed Paul's teaching (1 Cor. 13:1-13). Even faith now from the act of mental assent to the credible propositions became

an act of will, and is “a creative act of the soul.”³⁹ Luther, Calvin, and other reformers denied man any spontaneity and moral impulse.

Human nature cannot be depraved, condemned, utterly corrupt, and helpless, claimed Servetus in opposition to the reformers and Catholics. There is no inherent necessity for sin in man, no state of sin and depravity. Though Servetus justified this state by constant communication with God through God’s innate Spirit and inner light, he believed that we have knowledge of good and evil, and that we act with a free will. Sin thus becomes qualified, conditioned by historical, cultural and personal factors. And from this Servetus was able to deduce a universal and humanistic moral principle:

Natural righteousness is to give everyone what is his: that is, to help everybody in need and harm nobody; to do what conscience and natural reason dictate so that whatever you want others to do to you, do to others. In such righteousness ... nations are justified and saved, including the Jews.⁴⁰

Thus, all nations and peoples are taught from nature. Israelites were capable of righteousness through the Law and all other people through an inner natural light. Servetus granted all men dignity and recognized equal endowment in their ability to recognize good and evil.⁴¹ However, why Israelites were a special case and needed the Law, Servetus does not explain.

The Struggle for Freedom of Conscience

Servetus belongs to those Christian thinker in modern times who proclaimed in clear terms the right of every individual to follow his own conscience and express his own convictions. He was one of the first (if not the first) to express an idea that it was a crime to persecute and kill for ideas. His argument was rational based on a humanistic principle of morality:

Neither with those nor with others I am in agreement in everything, because all seem to me partly right and partly in error. Moreover, everyone sees the error of the other, but nobody sees his own It

would be easy to distinguish all this if in the church all people would be allowed to speak by contending in a prophetic spirit.⁴²

Servetus clearly stated already in 1531, that persecution and killing for ideas is contrary to the teaching of the apostles and the original church doctrine, in a letter addressed to Iohannes Oecolampadius (Johan Hausschein), leader of the Reformation in Basel. Servetus stated:

If you find me in error in one point you should not on that account condemn me in all, for according to this there is no mortal who would not be burned a thousand times The greatest of the apostles were sometimes in error. Even though you see Luther erring egregiously on some points you do not condemn him in the rest Such is human frailty that we condemn the spirits of others as impostors and impious and except our own, for no one recognizes his own errors ... I beg you, for God's sake, spare my name and fame ... You say that I want all to be robbers and that I will not suffer any to be punished and killed. I call almighty God to witness that this is not my opinion and I detest it, but if ever I said anything it is that I consider it a serious matter to kill men because they are in error on some question of scriptural interpretation, when we know that the very elect may be led astray.⁴³

This assertion of Servetus, though contrary to the assertions found in the Gospels (Matt. 13:12, 24:24), was later fully elaborated by Sebastian Castellio in his famous defense of Servetus and condemnation of Calvin, *Contra libellum Calvini* (1554):

To kill a man is not to defend a doctrine, but to kill a man. When the Genevans killed Servetus they did not defend a doctrine, they killed a man. The defense of a doctrine is not the matter to be resolved by the judges, it is an issue only to be solved by teachers. What has the sword to do with the matter of teaching?⁴⁴

In a letter to judges in Geneva dated August 22, 1553, Servetus defended the right to freedom of conscience and expression. He accused the court of instituting “a new invention unknown to the apostles, to their disciples, and the ancient church of initiating criminal procedure for the doctrines of the scripture or for the theological themes derived from it.” Even the Arians in the time of Constantine the Great were not handed over to civilian tribunals in accordance with the ancient doctrine, but the church alone decided such questions and the only possible punishment for “heresy” was banishment. Such a punishment was used against heretics in the primitive church. On the basis of these precedents he demanded to be set free from the criminal accusations.⁴⁵

Servetus’s struggle for freedom of conscience was a part of his program for the restoration of Christianity and one of the “heresies” for which he was condemned. Servetus attempted to discuss the issue with Calvin in one of his letters to Calvin sent with *Christianismi restitutio*. He approaches a problematic subject in his time and rhetorically asks himself whether it is permissible for the Christian to fulfill the duties of a magistrate or to be a king, or to kill. And Servetus answers to himself that: “While there is the world, regardless whether we want it or not, we have to preserve the worldly order, especially the one which is safeguarded by the administration of justice.” And he admits the death penalty for some especially malicious crimes, but categorically rejects such a penalty for schism or heresy:

In other crimes ... we have to expect corrections by using other types of punishments and not by killing. Among those we prefer exile ... as well as excommunication by the church which was used initially when there still were preserved traces of the apostolic tradition and with which schisms and heresies were punished.⁴⁶

In his religious program, Servetus, inspired by the rising spirit of the reform foresaw a plan for the restoration of Christianity to its simplicity and integrity. His basic premise is that faith is a free, voluntary and spontaneous act, an impulse or élan of the heart and only as secondary aspects it brings with itself

an act of rational approbation. From this he concludes that infant baptism and forceful indoctrination or forced conversion are abuses of human rights and dignity. In his doctrine of justification, Servetus differentiated the first justification by faith from the justification obtained by posterior works in accordance with the Catholic doctrine and contrary to that of Luther or Calvin. And this justification by works derives from the recognition of natural justice shared by all mankind as was taught by Paul (Rom. 2;14-17). And he links this doctrine to the Neo-Platonic and Stoic thought and explains its psychological mechanism in naturalistic terms. In terms of the practice of religion Servetus recognizes three ministries: preaching, baptism, and, dominical supper. He wants to restore the universal priesthood which was also Paul's doctrine (Thes. 4:8). The church is not a divine institution as the Catholic church claimed, but a union of believers.

Setting in Movement a Process of Change in the Social Paradigm

Just like in science where the accumulation of new data and scientific facts makes it necessary to reevaluate the old paradigm and establish a new one,⁴⁷ so personal sacrifice of a pious scholar became a turning point inducing thinking people to rethink the morality of the prevailing church ideology and mental framework of how religion and society treated the issue of intellectual inquiry and its repression.

The idea of punishing "heretics" was so pervasive in the society that it did not occur even to most thinking Protestants that the whole concept of repression of thought was evil and against the spirit, and the letter, of the Gospels. No Protestant religious leader was against the punishment of heretics in general. Even Sebastian Castellio, recognized champion of rational tolerance and a precursor of the French Revolution and the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme*, could not avoid these contradictions. Only later did he develop, through the experience of the fraternal religious war in France, the concept of mutual toleration and freedom of conscience. Though he still recognized the scripture as the source of valid statements, the concept of "*liberum arbitrium*" became the foundation of human

rationality and natural moral principle. The trap of contradictions and theocratic mentality were so pervading that even in the eighteenth century Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote in 1762 in his *Contrat social*, that in the future ideal state, one who did not believe in the religious truths decreed by the legislator should be banished from the state or even, one who, after having recognized them, would cease to believe should be punished by death.⁴⁸

A month after the publication of Calvin's *Defensio* there appeared in Basel an anonymous, eloquent pamphlet against intolerance entitled *De haereticis, an sint persequendi...* A few weeks later there appeared a French translation of this treatise entitled *Tracté des hérétiques, a savoir, si on les doit persecuter, etc.*⁴⁹ This treatise was later translated into German and Dutch (1620, 1663), and into English (1935).⁵⁰ The book contained extracts promoting toleration taken from the writings of some twenty five Christian writers, ancient and modern, including Luther and Calvin himself and was authored by Castellio, perhaps with some collaboration from Laelius Socinus and Celio Secondo Curione. Castellio wrote also a rebuttal to Calvin's *Defensio*, in the already mentioned *Contra libellum Calvini*.

The movement for tolerance grew out of the influence of Castellio and his associates in Basel. Servetus's martyrdom gave a stimulus to the rise of religious toleration as a general policy, as a moral principle. But the process was very slow and lasted for several centuries before the switch in paradigm could take place. The figure of Servetus stands out at the beginning of the movement. In the later phase Castellio deserves more ample recognition than he received. He continued to point out that most important is the principle of absolute tolerance of differing views. This position was an outgrowth of an entirely new concept of religion initiated by Servetus as centered not in dogma but in life and character and in Servetus's view it represented a return to the original Christianity. It is the very essence of this kind of religion to regard freedom and reason not as incidental but as fundamental conditions of a thoroughly wholesome existence of religion.

Servetus's legacy was first spread by the Italian humanists and reformers Francesco Stancarò, Giorgio Biandrata, Gianpaolo Alciati, Valentino Gentile, Bernardino Ochino, and Lelio and Fausto Sozzini in Poland and Transylvania, and led to the development of the Antitrinitarian or Unitarian movement represented by the Unitarians of Transylvania and the Socinians of Poland. In Poland they were known as the Minor Church or Polish Brethren. After their expulsion from Poland they developed into the Unitarian movement in England and America. Though Anabaptists demanded the separation of church and state based on the religious grounds, Socinians were the first who fully understood the moral imperative of the complete separation of state and religion on secular and political grounds. Such ideas were developed by Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), John Crell (1590-1633), Christopher Ostorodt (d. ca 1611), Andrew Wojdowski (1565-1622), John Sachs (1641-1671), and particularly by Samuel Przypkowski (1592-1670) and Jonasz Szlichtyng (1592-1661).⁵¹ They were the first to publish numerous treatises in Poland and in Holland which defended in modern political terms their rights against the machinations of Jesuits who eventually succeeded in the destruction of the Reformation in Poland.

Przypkowski, for example, argued in six points in a pamphlet entitled *Brotherly Declaration* (1646), the importance of guaranteeing freedom of conscience: 1. It is a fundamental right on which is based the integrity and freedom of the republic; 2. It is a foundation of the unity of the republic composed of many ethnic and religious groups; 3. It is a foundation of the social equality of citizens; 4. it is a foundation of all civil liberties; 5. It is a guardian against religious and ecclesiastical jurisdiction; 6. It is the highest law. Przypkowski, still in another treatise, *On the Law of the Christian Magistrate and Private Person in War and Peace* (1650), and Szlichtyng in *Apology for the Truth* (1654), developed a complete modern and secular doctrine of the separation of church and state.

Moral, social, and political doctrines of the Socinians eventually led to the development of the Enlightenment. Their ideas were perfected, extended and

popularized by writings of philosophers John Locke (1632-1704), Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), Voltaire (1694-1778), and David Hume (1711-1776).⁵² The arguments used by John Locke in his famous four *Letters on Toleration*, published in Holland between 1683 and 1689, follow those used by the Polish philosophers. Locke possessed in his library a complete set of Socinian works and certainly read them. He presented a detailed analysis of toleration and church-state relations from a political point of view, obviously suitable for the circumstances in England. A severe weakness of Locke's statements in which he contradicted himself, as well of some statements of the Polish Brethren, was the exclusion of atheists from religious liberty. Pierre Bayle made numerous references to the Socinians and introduced one more element for the change of the social paradigm: namely, *he was the first in the Christian world who argued for the separation of ethics and morality from religion. He also defended atheism on a rational basis.*

The ideas of John Locke were transplanted directly to the American continent by James Madison (1751-1836) and Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), who implemented them for the first time in American legislation.⁵³ They were philosopher-statesmen who shared a strong conviction of absolute freedom of conscience and distrusted any kind of established ecclesiastical institution. Their conviction was that the established churches create only "ignorance and corruption" and introduce the "diabolic principle of persecution." The exercise of religion should be completely separated from government. Toleration was not enough; only absolute freedom could be acceptable. For them democracy was the best guarantee of religious freedom. It was an institution that erected a "wall of separation" between church and state, and protected the liberties of minority groups against the imposition of majority views. Both were broadly educated and Jefferson had a keen interest in studying religions, especially Servetus and the Socinians.⁵⁴

In the religious realm the result of the seminal thoughts of Servetus and trends of the Renaissance was the development of a universalistic understanding

of the divinity which breaks with the tribal or ecclesiastical particularism and finds its expression either in the theistic form as Universalist Unitarianism or in the non-theistic or even atheistic forms of modern Humanism.

From a historical perspective, Servetus died in order that freedom of conscience could become a civil right of the individual in modern society.

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