

Sebastian Castellio

the Pioneer of Toleration

Frank Walker

From 1542 to 1545 an epidemic of the plague raged in Geneva. The Protestant ministers were reluctant to visit the sick and dying. The preachers met and confessed that it was certainly their duty but God had not given them the strength to go to the hospital. They prayed to be excused. The Council specifically exempted John Calvin himself from visiting the infected. He was far too valuable to the Church to risk his life, they said, and Calvin agreed. The only one who freely volunteered to go was Sebastian Castellio, the headmaster of the new children's school.

Castellio was six years younger than Calvin, but already his equal in scholarship and learning, being an expert in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, as well as in philosophy and theology. He translated the Bible into Latin and French, a vast undertaking. He was a brilliant teacher, an educational genius. He produced a series of class readers for children, retelling the Bible stories in an attractive and highly readable form.

He was born into a humble family in the Dauphine near the Savoy border and was early recognised as an exceptionally gifted youth. While a student at Lyons University he was appalled by witnessing three young Protestants being burned alive for heresy. Henceforth he became firmly attached to the rising cause of Protestantism. He saw the Reformation as the expression of the same joyful life-affirming spirit that animated the classics and the Renaissance. When Calvin was reinstated as the spiritual leader of Geneva he joined him there and was eventually appointed regent of the new children's school.

Calvin was simply the designated preacher of the Word of God at Geneva but *de facto* he was the city's dictator. Indeed he became a kind of Protestant pope, inspiring the new reformed

churches in France, Switzerland, England, Scotland, the Netherlands, Germany and Eastern Europe. He was an organiser and administrator of genius, ceaselessly receiving information, giving advice and orders to the new Reformed communities. His influence and authority became vast, and the power he wielded in Geneva was immense.

Power corrupts and Calvin was no exception. As he grew older he no longer taught: he dogmatised. He came to see those who disagreed with him as enemies of God. There was the rub. Calvin and his supporters were extreme Puritans, anxious to fasten their rigid and harsh 'Discipline' remorselessly on everyone from the highest to the lowest in the city. Wherever they found people having fun they were determined to put a stop to it. Those who absented themselves from Calvin's preaching were severely punished by imprisonment. These hyper-Puritans forced a lock-down that shut out all infectious pleasures. Practically everything that might make life colourful and enjoyable was forbidden. No theatres, amusements, festivals, dancing or skating. No colourful clothes or ornaments. No family parties of more than twenty people.

During the first five years of Calvin's autocracy thirteen were hanged, ten beheaded, thirty-five burned, seventy-five driven from their homes into exile. The prisons and torture chambers were full. A man smiled at a christening; someone fell asleep during a sermon; two people played skittles; a citizen called Calvin Monsieur instead of Maître – all were sent to prison. A man sang in the street late at night – banished. Two young boys accused of indecency were condemned to be burned at the stake – the sentence was commuted, but they were forced to see the faggots blazing. Two bargees were caught up in a drunken brawl. None was hurt, but both

were executed. One who criticised Calvin's doctrine of predestination was publicly flogged at the crossroads and then banished. Jacques Gruet called Calvin a hypocrite – he was tortured on the rack and then executed. Such was the evangelical rule of Calvin and his supporters.

Castellio sensed Calvin's secret jealousy and hostility. The Council of Geneva offered Castellio the post of parish minister at Vandoeuvres. However, Calvin intervened and made the Council retract their offer. He claimed Castellio's views on the Bible, in which he saw the *Song of Songs* as a Hebrew love poem (a view with which all modern scholars agree), and his understanding of Christ's descent into hell, which was different from Calvin's, all made him unfit for the ministry. Calvin's antagonism could not be clearer, so Castellio resigned his position at the school.

He went to Basle, where he scraped a living by working as a tutor, by translating, by proof-reading for the printers and publishers and even as a builder's labourer, a hod-carrier. He was subjected to lying attacks and calumnies by Calvin and his cronies.

They hated his sympathy for the Anabaptists, the most viciously persecuted group in Europe. These were poor people who had taken their religion into their own hands, symbolised by being baptised again in their own way, not controlled by any king, bishop or pope. Castellio recognised them as some of the most honest, brave and sincere people of their time. He wrote frequently to Protestant clergy who had the ear of rulers to urge the magistrates not to persecute these innocent people. Also, sickened by the wars of religion in France, he implored the French Catholics and Protestants to find ways of living peacefully together.

He passionately believed this was possible. 'The truths of religion,' he wrote, 'are in their nature mysterious, and after more than a thousand years are still the field of unending struggle, in which blood will not cease to flow until spiritual love illuminates us and is given the last word.' For this he received vicious abuse from his Calvinist former colleagues. Eventually Castellio was appointed professor of Greek at Basle University, but the attempts to denigrate

him and persuade the University to dismiss him and put him on trial for heresy never ceased.

There now enters an extraordinary character who was to play a most significant and tragic role in Castellio's last years. Michael Servetus was the son of a judge in northern Spain and showed exceptional promise at an early age. He trained in law at the University of Toulouse and soon became expert in Greek and Hebrew so he could read the Bible in its original languages. Soon he was alive with the new Protestant spirit, left the service of Cardinal Quintana, for whom he had been working in Rome, and took up work with the new printing presses in Lyons.

When he read the Bible in its original languages, he was astounded to discover no mention of the doctrine of the Trinity as set forth at Nicea in 325 A.D. As a Spaniard he was well aware of the Muslims and Jews in his country to whom such a doctrine was a great stumbling block hindering their acceptance of Christianity. And yet it was not in the Bible! He visited Protestant scholars, urging them to reform Christianity still further. Aged only twenty-two, with the impetuosity of youth he wrote a book entitled *Concerning the Errors of the Trinity*. Unsurprisingly, he was met with angry rebuke and cursed as a blaspheming heretic. Servetus was undoubtedly well-meaning, but also naive and arrogant.

He left for Paris, where he studied medicine under the name of Villanovus. One of his fellow students (in law, not medicine) was a young man called John Calvin, destined to play a tragic part in Servetus's later life. Servetus worked with the famous medical professor Vesalius in preparing dissections, and himself became a talented medical scientist. Well before Harvey he made a great and historic discovery: the pulmonary circulation of the blood. Typically, he did not follow this up or effectively explore the implications of his discovery. He dabbled in astrology, which put him in danger of arrest. So he fled Paris, changed his name again to Michel de Villeneuve.

The next we hear of him, he is living in Vienne near Lyons. He has become physician to the local archbishop and a highly respected citizen. While working as a doctor, he wrote

another book, *The Restoration of Christianity*, and corresponded with none other than his old acquaintance John Calvin. Enraged by these heretical letters Calvin declared that if ever the Spaniard entered Geneva, he would not allow him to leave it alive. Servetus's new book came to the notice of the Catholic Inquisition, who wished to arrest the author and try him for heresy. They could not find him.

Eventually Calvin and his Protestant friends in Geneva discovered that Dr Michel de Villeneuve and Michael Servetus were one and the same. They betrayed him to the Catholic Inquisition, using some of Servetus's letters to Calvin as incontrovertible proof. Servetus was arrested but managed to escape. (Perhaps he had friends who would be happy to ensure that no trouble came to their respected and beloved family doctor.) Servetus was burnt (but only in effigy) together with his books. Servetus went into hiding. He intended to make for Naples, but unaccountably he decided to pass through Geneva. On his arrival he was arrested and chained up in a filthy prison to await his trial for blasphemy and heresy. He was not allowed any defence counsel. At length the Town Council condemned him to be burnt alive over a slow fire. (They were well aware that Calvin wanted the death sentence).

Could Calvin possibly have thought: 'This man is an obsessive with a bee in his bonnet. He's too mad to take seriously. He's a learned man in his own way, but I strongly disagree with him. He's a bore and a nuisance, but there's no point in my getting too angry. Just leave him alone and ignore him. He's harmless. Yes, he's mad – but it would be even more insane to burn



Castellio. Image: en.wikipedia.org

him to death just for being a bore.' No, Calvin was not a modern man with modern attitudes. Calvin would never make such a reasonable and humane response. He was utterly determined to condemn and punish Servetus. He openly admitted this and tried to justify it. If it is a question of God's honour, he argued, where that is at stake there can be no mercy, we must react with the greatest rigour, for God himself demands it. He wrote: 'God destroys all the human affections by which our hearts are usually softened, he chases away a father's love for his children, he strips men of their nature so that nothing may cool their zeal. One does not do him the honour due to him if one does not does not prefer his service before every human

consideration, even to forgetting all humanity when it is a question of fighting for God's glory.' (Quoted in *Sebastien Castellio* by Etienne Giran , p.279). Frightening words!

That Protestants should burn heretics at the stake was a new development, uncomfortably reminiscent of the Catholic Inquisition, and many in the Reformed churches were very uneasy. Their doubts were soon brought into sharp focus by the publication by Sebastian Castellio (using the pseudonym Martin Bellius) of *Concerning Heretics: Should they be Persecuted?* No, they should not, he declared and demolished Calvin's arguments. In the life and teaching of Jesus we learn that God's glory is to be found in the practice of love and mercy, not in acts of cruel and murderous vengeance. 'To burn a man alive does not defend a doctrine: it is simply to slay a man.'

Servetus was not mad. He met his death with amazing courage and dignity. In the midst of his horrific sufferings he said, 'Jesus, son of the eternal God have pity on me' – a profoundly Christian prayer. He prayed for his executioners. He died without one word of hate, calm in his faith. His nobility in death is staggering: he is truly an authentic martyr of the human conscience.

Calvin argued that those who defend heretics are little better than heretics themselves and deserve the same punishment. He campaigned for Castellio's dismissal from his professorship and insisted he should be tried for heresy. His wish was not granted. Worn out by overwork and ceaseless struggles on December 29th, 1563 Sebastian Castellio died at the young age of forty-eight.

Scorned and derided in his own time, Castellio became the great pioneer of religious tolerance and freedom, ideals basic to the modern world, but constantly in one form or another under threat. Castellio has triumphed in a way he could not have foreseen. In this matter of toleration most Reformed churches now follow Castellio, not Calvin. The United Nations has declared for religious freedom. What would have specially delighted Castellio is that the Roman Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council in 1962 - 65 made a solemn declaration in favour of

religious freedom. It has become our accepted theory, but by no means always honoured in practice. In many countries 'blasphemy' is still a crime punishable by death. Calvin is not extinct and Castellio's spirit still needs to be honoured.

Note: This article is based on the biography of Castellio by Etienne Giran: *Sebastien Castellion et la Reforme Calviniste: les Deux Reformes*, (Amsterdam and Paris, 1913). Giran, a Frenchman, was minister to a congregation of 'Free Thinkers and Free Believers' in Amsterdam. He served in the French army throughout the First World War and was awarded the Croix de Guerre and made Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur. He was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp where he died aged 77 in 1944. His son Olivier became a notable leader of the French Resistance and was executed by firing squad in 1943 at the age of 23. His letters from prison, expressing love for his parents and passionate devotion to France are greatly respected in France. Like his father, but posthumously, he was awarded the Croix de Guerre and membership of the Légion d'Honneur. Father and son are martyrs for freedom in the spirit of Sebastian Castellio.

Frank Walker was a Unitarian minister (and teacher of English in Further Education) in Halifax, Bristol and Cambridge, 1959 - 2000. During Lockdown he has been translating *Sebastien Castellion et la Reforme Calviniste* by Etienne Giran, (Amsterdam & Paris 1913) a biography of the great 17th century pioneer of religious tolerance.

