

To Kill a Heretic: Sebastian Castellio against John Calvin

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Calvin: *The fact that the sword has been used for persecution does not prevent the pious magistrate from using his rod to defend the afflicted Church, nor do the crosses of the martyrs impede the just aid of the laws that the faithful may worship God in tranquillity.*

Vaticanus: *If Servetus had attacked you by arms, you had rightly been defended by the magistrate; but since he opposed you in writings, why did you oppose them with iron and flame? Do you call this the defence of the pious magistrate? ... 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 defence of doctrine is not the affair of the magistrate but of the doctor. What has the sword to do with doctrine?*¹

John Calvin did not lose much sleep worrying about his enemies, who were legion, but one in particular haunted him for the last twenty years of his life: the humanist Sebastien Castellio (1515–1563), who was an almost exact contemporary.² Castellio is best remembered as an early proponent of toleration, a concept frequently misunderstood when applied to the early modern period either as a modern sense of openness to difference or as scepticism. Castellio's position on religion was neither, and he once declared 'I hate heretics'.³ What he also hated, as indicated by the quotation above from *Contra Libellum Calvini* ('Against Calvin's Book', 1562), was any sense that a person should be put to death for his or her beliefs. Heretics were wrong, and profoundly damaging to the church, but they were deluded rather than malevolent. Their correction should be by persuasion, not fire, the fate of Michel Servetus, burned for heresy at Geneva in 1553.

Calvin violently detested Castellio for several reasons. In part, his dislike was personal. When Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541 (he had been forced out in 1537 by opposition), Castellio had been supportive, eager to bring a fellow humanist to reform the city and its environs. Initially the two men were friends, and Calvin found Castellio both a teaching position and financial assistance. However, relations quickly soured, forcing Castellio and his family to flee Geneva to settle in Basel, where he became professor of Greek. Calvin ridiculed Castellio's work on the Bible, both his translations and interpretations, with the Song of Songs proving especially controversial. Calvin held to the traditional interpretation of the biblical book as describing Christ and the Church, while for Castellio it was an erotic love poem.

There were, however, other reasons for Calvin's persecution of Castellio. In Calvin's eyes, Geneva was not big enough for the two humanists, particularly as Castellio was every bit as talented, if not more talented, as a linguist and scholar. Calvin felt threatened by Castellio, a feeling that never left him. Their disagreement over the Bible was a harbinger of what was to come, and the debate over the Servetus affair cannot be separated from their opposing attitudes towards the Word of God as well as their personal animosity.

Only a few copies of Castellio's *Against Calvin's Book* survive. It was not printed until fifty years after it had been written, in the original Latin in the Netherlands. The work followed Castellio's well-known text *Concerning Heretics* (*De haereticis*, 1554), in which he had developed, under a pseudonym, his initial arguments on toleration.⁴ In *Concerning Heretics*, which proved highly controversial, Castellio had assembled quotations from many authors, including Erasmus and Luther, to demonstrate that executing a heretic was wrong. Indeed he even used a couple of quotations from Calvin's 1536 edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in which the reformer had argued in favour of clemency for the Turks.⁵

Against Calvin's Book was not published during Castellio's lifetime, being first printed in 1612, although the exact reasons for the hesitation to issue the work are not known. Certainly the situation in Basel was uncertain, and the wisdom of publishing an anti-Calvin tract was questionable. The Genevan reformer had many influential supporters in the city and they kept close watch on both Castellio and his friend Celio Secondo Curione, whose theological work had been suppressed by censors. Although Basel had long harboured concerns about Calvin and Geneva, those who held senior offices in both the church and ruling Council were cautious about allowing the city to be torn apart by open debate and unbridled criticism. Castellio knew that he could

easily antagonize the city's censors and he chose to have *Against Calvin's Book* circulate among friends in manuscript.

In *Against Calvin's Book*, Castellio prosecuted the same line of argument about toleration as he had in *Concerning Heretics*, but was more passionate and wrote with greater venom against Calvin. Although Castellio did not name himself as author, neither his readers nor the reformers in Geneva were in any doubt from whom the text sprang. The principal question of the book is found in the quotation heading this essay: should a heretic be put to death? As the passage reveals, Castellio was opposed to the execution of those who denied the faith not because he was sceptical of biblical truth, but because doctrine and capital punishment did not belong together. It is not given to men, he argued, to presume the judgement of God. Executions for matters of belief were against God's will.⁶

Castellio never understood the correction of error in terms of punishment. Correction was about persuasion, reflecting his belief in the essential reasonableness of humanity and doctrinal discourse. He belonged to the stream of reformation thought uncomfortable with the role of the magistrates in upholding theology and in having control over the church.

Castellio's *Against Calvin's Book* was a response to a particular text, the Genevan reformer's *Defence of the Orthodox Faith*, in which Castellio had been savaged for his supposed defence of Servetus as a notorious heretic. In response, Castellio was adamant that his arguments against executions were not to be conflated with condoning heresy, which he resolutely refused to do. 'I shall not defend the doctrine of Servetus', he wrote, 'but condemn the doctrine of Calvin.'⁷ Indeed, to make matters deeply personal, Castellio wrote *Against Calvin* as a dialogue in which the defender of the execution of Michel Servetus was the eponymous reformer, whose words were taken directly from his *Defence*. Nothing could have been better calculated to enrage Geneva than to have its arguments tossed back laced with irony. To make matters worse, the opponent in the dialogue of dispatching heretics was given the name 'Vaticanus', making Rome more reasonable than Geneva.

The personal nature of Castellio's accusations course through *Against Calvin's Book*, notably in his description of Calvin as having written his *Defence* with hands covered in blood. The incendiary language of gore and blood thirst was common among Calvin's opponents in the Servetus case, but Castellio's graphic image of brutality in Geneva circulated widely among readers and served to spread the 'black legend' that would damage Calvin's reputation for centuries.⁸ By reputation moderate and self-effacing, Castellio unleashed the hounds

in *Against Calvin's Book*, cataloguing in detail his opponent's character flaws: Calvin was harsh and unforgiving, lusting both to hate and to kill. Such traits were evident in his loveless theology, which emphasized a spiteful God of double predestination; a God who was the author of sin and nothing less than a tyrant. Indeed, that God was more the image of Calvin himself than any loving deity. Castellio had abandoned hope of reconciliation with Geneva; there was no moderation, only venom as he sought to discredit Calvin through a humiliating dialogue in which the Genevan reformer offered nothing but self-righteous condemnation.

To a certain degree, Castellio flattered Calvin by making him wholly responsible for the suffering of the miserable Servetus, who had been roughly handled in France, falsely tried and burnt in Champel in October 1553, just outside the walls of Geneva. At every stage, according to Castellio, Calvin was the chief force for evil. Castellio would have known full well that Calvin did not possess the authority to have Servetus executed, but it served his purposes to make the Genevan reformer the face of persecution. Servetus, for his part, was also turned into a literary figure, attributed all the misery of Christian martyrs and made into an innocent victim of the church's accumulated cruelty.

Although Castellio was careful not to defend Servetus' heretical views, such as his denial of the Trinity and of the divinity of Christ, in *Against Calvin's Book* he attributed error to the unimaginably harsh physical and psychological treatment to which the Spaniard had been subjected. Castellio turned the tables by making Calvin the author of error through his calumny. Indeed, Geneva's protestations that Servetus had been treated according to the law were, Castellio wrote, nothing more than the lies of the fork-tongued devil. 'Had Calvin ever languished in a Spanish prison,' Castellio scoffed, 'then he would know how reasonable are the admonitions of the enemy.'⁹

In *Against Calvin's Book*, Castellio viewed Servetus in a light entirely different from that perceived by the Genevans. The Spaniard had not sought to destroy the Christian religion, he argued; indeed his works proposed nothing of the sort. Castellio made a crucial distinction also found in his earlier work: heretics were to be distinguished from blasphemers and deniers of God, who could be legitimately punished by magistrates. Heretics were mistaken, and were genuinely concerned with the renewal of the faith. Their doubts may have been misplaced, but they did not amount to a capital offence. Calvin, by contrast, read Castellio's *Concerning Heretics* as a serious threat to the Reformation and church. The body of Christ was stained by the presence of heretics who denied the very

nature of God; it was, therefore, as an instrument of divine will that he acted to remove the mark of denial of the truth.

The cited passage takes us to the heart of Castellio's argument, if we set aside the polemic. The Savoyard, in contrast to Calvin, saw the Servetus issue as a question of deeds, not belief. His criticism of both the Frenchman and the Genevans focused on how they had responded to Servetus, not on the Spaniard's supposed doctrinal errors. In an Erasmian vein, Castellio saw one's actions as revealing one's attitude towards truth and charity.¹⁰ The Servetus case, therefore, was not primarily about heresy, but about how the Genevan magistrates had dealt with a man.

The opening disagreement in the quotation demonstrates two entirely different lines of argument, consistent in their internal principles, which were impossible to reconcile. 'Calvin', who, as we have seen, speaks in the words of his *Defence*, argues on the level of actions by distinguishing between persecution and defence of the faith in terms of the use of force. The church, Calvin argues, has long suffered violent persecution, but this fact does not permit Christians to inflict harm on others. However, despite the persecution suffered by Christians at the hands of worldly authorities, it could not be denied that faithful rulers possess by divine warrant the authority to put criminals to death. For Calvin, therefore, persecution and the legitimate duties of Christian magistrates were not to be confused. The role of the church as interpreter of the Gospel was to ensure that the magistrates' decisions were in accordance with the Word of God. However, temporal authority also had a responsibility to follow the legitimate laws of the state, and as denial of the Trinity was a legal offence and not only doctrinal error, the magistrates were compelled to act. Castellio could not accept the logic of this position that collapsed the distinction between force and faith. Violence could only be a legitimate response to violence, and 'Vaticanus' counters Calvin's claims by pointing out that Servetus did not physically attack Geneva.

Castellio's arguments help us to understand part of the reason why his work could not be printed in Basel and would have been censored. Not only had the religious leaders of the city supported the execution of Servetus in 1573, but the implications of Castellio's arguments were wholly unacceptable to any early modern government, which would not have wanted to limit its rights to execute those who denied the faith of the state. This was the principle the Swiss cities of Basel, Zurich and Bern had supported. Castellio's distinction between action and belief was not widely shared beyond a small group of humanists and sceptics, and he would have enjoyed little support among the

Basel rulers. Their hostility was a key component in making *Against Calvin's Book* unacceptable for the public.

For us to understand the gulf between Castellio and Calvin illustrated in the quotation, we can usefully return to the Erasmus/Luther dispute over free will in the early 1520s. Erasmus and Luther opposed each other not only with different arguments, but with two entirely different methods of debate. While Luther took a direct approach, seeing the crux of the matter in terms of the acceptance or denial of human free will in salvation, Erasmus addressed the subject as conversation. In other words, Luther sought precision of argument in a debate over a matter of great importance, while Erasmus wanted a dialogue in which the truth would emerge from discussion.¹¹

Like Luther, Calvin never wrote dialogues. That literary form was for him an inadequate means of communicating theological truth. He worked towards absolute answers, while Castellio was prepared to explore matters of doubt as open questions. For Castellio, as for Erasmus, written texts were the place for discussion, and should not be confused with the black and white moral issues of physical confrontation. To draw writing, where thought might be explored more expansively, into the physical realm of warfare and punishment was in itself error. That position was unacceptable to Calvin, who held a writer directly responsible for what his text said. For the Genevan, what Servetus wrote in his offensive works reflected his offensive views and posed a danger to the community. Castellio, in contrast, saw Servetus' books as loci for discussion and debate. The debate between Calvin and Castellio focused on certainty. Calvin, at the beginning of his *Institutes*, argued that faith is knowledge, that because we know that God has saved us, we are able to have faith in him. Castellio, in turn, believed that knowledge only pertained to empirical things, outward actions that could be understood. Faith, therefore, was akin to belief, which was received from God and did not belong to the senses, so was not knowledge. This fundamental distinction divided the two men. Both believed that the other had faith and knowledge in the wrong order.

Although loath to say so directly, Castellio's assumption was that scripture is not always clear, and thus there is room for doubt on certain matters. Such lack of clarity creates room for disagreement among theologians and makes decisions to execute heretics all the more lamentable. Castellio's distinction between an act of aggression by Servetus and his doubts about doctrinal matters was based on his beliefs about human knowledge, which did not possess certainty concerning outward human actions. Concerning external acts, agreement on whether something is right or wrong is possible; thus, if Servetus had used physical

force against Calvin or the Genevans, his actions would have been punishable. On issues such as the Trinity and infant baptism, however, scripture does not provide unambiguous guidance, and their truth is therefore not evident to the mind or senses. Castellio prized above elusive doctrinal certainty those outward actions that could be judged with certainty – piety and moral action. Calvin and the magistrates were to be judged on their responses, and Calvin was amongst those in error, for he had behaved with intolerance and viciousness on matters on which there could be legitimate disagreement.

On the other side, Calvin, and later Theodor Beza, his successor in Geneva, suspected that Castellio denied revelation and held that Christianity was little more than ethical code about moral improvement. Indeed, what Castellio wrote in his early works on toleration could easily lead to such a conclusion, and he was eager to make refinements in light of the harsh criticism from Geneva. He did not wish to undermine the authority of scripture, nor did he want to say that reason had no place in revelation. He was also sensitive to accusations that in making the Christian faith an ethical code, he left no distinction from Islam or Judaism. To do so would deny the special role of Jesus Christ.

We return to the quotation. For Castellio, or ‘Vaticanus’, temporal authority could have nothing to do with the faith *per se*; its role was constrained to protecting the church from threat, but doctrinal difference was not such a threat. As Hans Guggisberg has written, ‘For the humanist Castellio, each individual as a divinely created being endowed with reason was worth much more than any unifying ecclesiastical doctrine.’¹² Because Christians are sinful and therefore prone to immorality, the state needs to intervene to punish. This authority, however, did not extend to matters of belief. Magistrates were to protect the community, often from itself.

