

The Christian Persecutory Impulse

David Trim

Review & Critique by Barbara Buzzard



This is a review of five articles published in *Liberty Magazine*,¹ with additional material of my own. The subject is a fascinating one. Religious persecution has taken many forms and many faiths have been persecuted, but it is the focus of these articles to consider the persecution of Christians *by* Christians. The author makes the point that persecution was not first implemented by emperors, but that “it emerged out of the fervor of Christians to combat error and to spread truth...There are lessons to be learned about our own impulse to persecute in the twenty-first century.”²

David Trim references Roger Williams who argued “that it was under Constantine that the church first made the fatal misstep of trying to impose personal beliefs by the sword...Constantine, it is claimed, effectively ‘commandeer[ed] Christianity to bolster his ambitions for the empire,’ with the result that orthodoxy and heresy became ‘essentially a matter of power politics.’”³ Interestingly, Trim does not agree with Williams and feels that he misunderstood the very nature of early persecution. He credits Constantine with the belief that truth could and should only be spread by persuasion, not persecution. This is a profoundly thought-provoking concept: force or persuasion – which is Jesus’ model? Did he ever compel or terrorize?

“It is stupid,” L’Hospital wrote “to think that this division of minds can be settled by the power of the sword and with gleaming armor.” How could beliefs which are internal and mental and spiritual be resolved by physical brute force?⁴

However, says Trim: “It is essential to recognize that for over a thousand years, Christians have often been eager persecutors. Certainty of truth and absolute love for God can lead believers into contempt for those who think differently. This tendency will become especially apparent...when we look at the medieval paradigm of persecution. But it is important to acknowledge that there has been a persecutory impulse in Christianity since at least the late fourth century, for it is only if we are aware of intolerant tendencies that we can resist them.”⁵ I cannot agree with this author’s rationale that absolute love for God may lead one into contempt. Contempt would emanate from a different spirit than the spirit of God.

I think that the act of causing one to examine, reflect, and study this topic is so valuable to our Christian worldview, that though I certainly cannot endorse all the sentiments in these articles, they are well worth reading. After a fairly kindly approach to this subject, Trim concludes: “There seems to be implicit within Christianity as practiced

¹ *Liberty Magazine*, 2011, libertymagazine.org

² “The Christian Persecutory Impulse,” Part One in a Series, p. 1

³ *Ibid.*,

⁴ *Ibid.*, Part Four, p. 2

⁵ *Ibid.*, Part One, p. 4

over the past 2,000 years (*even if not as taught by Christ*) a persecutory impulse.”⁶ There is something awfully wrong here. Jesus did not persecute, never taught persecution nor condoned it, and was a victim of it himself. And yet the established church has always practiced it. It is surely foreign to and totally outside the teachings of Jesus.

What were the origins of Christian intolerance?

Augustine argued ingeniously that the Apostle Paul had been forcibly converted to Christianity and that therefore there was “*a just persecution, that of love, which summons from error to the truth*, in order to redeem its enemies from corruption.”⁷ This perverted notion gave him cause to compel both pagans and heretics to ascribe to his version of truth. Though Augustine countenanced violent persecution, he maintained it was an act of love. All logical readers and Bible students surely ought to question this.

“Heresy was generally seen as insidious and infectious — it was constantly characterized in sermons, commentaries, and polemic as pollution; as a highly contagious disease such as leprosy; as a cancer; as gangrene...Just as cutting out a cancer or amputating a gangrenous limb was painful for the area of the body involved but saved the body as a whole, so the Christian must steadfastly, unwaveringly cut the tumor and blight of heresy out of the body of Christ, hurting the individual heretic so that the community as a whole might be saved.”⁸

“When the fate of the nation was at stake, violence was a reasonable response — this was the origin of the just war. If religious diversity endangered the nation, then violence, in the form of persecution or of religious war, was, again, justified.”⁹

“Huldrych Zwingli attacked the Anabaptists ‘as seditious and treasonous, as murderers and poisoners,’ and, at his request, in 1526 Zurich made Anabaptism punishable by death. About the same time Luther roundly declared that anyone who asserted that ‘Christ is not God’ should be ‘stoned.’”¹⁰ The crime of Anabaptists was that they did not believe in infant baptism; many asserted that they were loyal subjects in everything except religion. Not good enough, said Zwingli. “Off with their heads.” And so said Luther.

As for John Calvin, in treatises published in the late 1540s he wrote that heretics “‘infect souls with the poison of depraved dogma’...He *warned against feelings of mercy*, since Christian charity dictated that heretics could be neither tolerated, nor pardoned once apprehended.”¹¹ It is assumed that we think of these men as having possessed the spirit of God, when they violated time and time again the law of love. Since no murderer is to inherit the Kingdom of God – I must ask why their status is so highly respected?

Trim warns us that thinking that we are more enlightened, more sophisticated, more tolerant does not necessarily save us from oppressive behaviors ourselves. He argues that the temptation to persecute or limit religious freedom is *persistent*. “It may

⁶ Ibid., Part Two, p. 1, emphasis added.

⁷ Ibid., p. 2

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p.3

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., emphasis added.

well be that what an eminent historian of the Reformation called ‘the virus of intolerance and persecution’ is ‘always present and [can] become virulent when the conditions [are] right.’ Understanding why past generations of Christians persecuted and that they did so from the best as well as worst of impulses might not inoculate us against the virus, but it might at least enhance our ability to resist it.”¹²

It is argued that at the start of the Reformation, persecution was undertaken out of *love*. (Argued unsuccessfully with me.) “The actual horrors of immolation alive, of breaking at the wheel, of hanging, drawing, and quartering, and of torture — all commonly applied against religious dissidents — were now widely witnessed and spoke powerfully against the idealized view of persecution as an act of Christian love.”¹³ Trim concludes that gradually the instinctive revulsion at violence began to be expressed in print in the 1550s. I think the matter is more accurately summed up by theologian Augustin Marlorat when he asserted that “the true church of Christ [is] known in this, that it suffereth persecution and doth not persecute again.”¹⁴ He offers us this astonishing contrast: what marked the “church of Antichrist [was] her bloody persecutions.”¹⁵

It was Castellio who in 1562 argued that it was wrong to force people to violate their consciences. He also posed this question: suppose those who had been punished were *actually not heretics, but martyrs*. Remember that Jesus had also been accused of heresy and blasphemy and his accusers were also the religious establishment.

John Foxe¹⁶ argued from common humanity and from simple horror of the flames; and it is said that he argued for mercy even for those for whom he felt no sympathy.

I am astonished that one of the most significant of persecution accounts, that of the burning alive of Michael Servetus in 1553, is not even mentioned. Servetus was not only a brilliant medical doctor to whom the credit goes for the discovery of the workings of the pulmonary system. (This discovery has assured him of a lasting place in the history of science.) There is a museum in Spain dedicated to this remarkable man who has also been credited with the freedom of speech which we enjoy today. He was an avid theologian, one who opposed John Calvin, and that was his downfall. As a 2008 book reveals, John Calvin had Servetus put to death.¹⁷ Interestingly, the author concludes that Calvin was jealous of Servetus. Several other books have been written about this remarkable man, a man who spoke several languages, a passionate student of the Scriptures.¹⁸ His was the first judicial murder in Geneva, precluding the thought that this was the order of the day. “Servetus died for his convictions in such an impressive manner that not even Calvin’s apologists, of whom there are not a few, can detract from it.”¹⁹ To this day, John Calvin is hailed as a hero and this murder and the murders that followed Servetus²⁰ are excused by many clergy.

¹² Ibid., p. 4

¹³ Ibid., Part Three, p. 2

¹⁴ Augustin Marlorat, a Huguenot theologian, himself martyred

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ John Foxe, English scholar, *Actes and Monuments of These Latter and Perilous Dayes* (Foxe’s Book of Martyrs)

¹⁷ *Did Calvin Murder Servetus?*, Standford Rives

¹⁸ *Out of the Flames*, Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone

¹⁹ *A History of Christianity*, Kurt Aland

²⁰ Ibid.

“In 1897 Adolf Harnack in his *History of Dogma* wrote of Servetus’ ‘deeply pious spirit — the best of everything that came to maturity in the sixteenth century.’”²¹ “There was an uproar in many quarters of Europe over this legalized murder. In truth Servetus was a symbol for the countless thousands — only God knows how many — who were killed for rejection of the triune God doctrine.”²² Historian Paul Johnson²³ confirmed that Calvin used the Justinian Code to kill Servetus *legally*. I understand that this killing is a great embarrassment to the established church and that they simply wish that all memory of it would disappear, that it could be whitewashed from history. But it will not go away: historians and scholars keep writing about this devout man; in fact, Servetus’ *The Restoration of Christianity* was published in 2007 after ten years of work on the translation.²⁴ A Yale University professor of church history published his findings in *Hunted Heretic, The Life and Death of Michael Servetus*.²⁵

Historian Kurt Aland describes the scene in Calvin’s Geneva two years after the murder of Servetus: “The leaders of the insurrection were brought to trial for rebellion and conspiring against the Christian Reformation. Torture was employed in the interrogations, and the result was that twelve people were sentenced to death and not a few were exiled or had their property confiscated.”²⁶ Were these deaths also attributable to John Calvin? Many were tortured in grotesque ways — and we are asked to believe that Calvin was a man of God?

David Trim summarizes: “Today persecution seems so hateful that it is easy to assume that it derived from hate — it seems so manifestly wrong and unchristian that it is easy to assume that the impulse to persecute comes only from what we perceive as the darker side of humanity.”²⁷ How I wish he had stopped there! But he continues: “But if that were so, it would not be as common. Persecution often springs from our higher, rather than our baser, instincts — harassment of the heterodox does not always derive from the desire to hurt, but sometimes from the desire to help; religious liberty is often denied out of the finest of motives. In trying to counteract the seemingly perpetual human addiction to persecution, therefore, we need to recognize that generosity of spirit and humane instincts are not enough, for they have been found among persecutors.”²⁸

I believe that I can guarantee that no one undergoing or having undergone serious persecution would see it this way. I am very sorry that he rationalizes in this manner. The blood of martyrs and giants of the faith cries out for justice. Yes, the necessary conclusion of the matter would be grave for the church but better than to be in the wrong camp as per Proverbs 17:15 where we are told that “The LORD despises those who acquit the guilty and condemn the innocent.”

I have not been able or willing in this review even to describe some of the torments suffered by the persecuted. The idea that the torturers would be pleasing in God’s sight is appalling to me and I find no evidence for it in Scripture. Could it even be blasphemy against God’s name? How is it that we can overlook Romans 12:19? “Dear

²¹ *Was John Calvin a Christian in Name Only?*, Clark Barefoot

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *History of Christianity*, Paul Johnson

²⁴ Edwin Mellen Press

²⁵ Roland Bainton, 1953

²⁶ *A History of Christianity*, Vol. 2, p. 195

²⁷ *The Christian Persecutory Impulse*, Part Five, p. 9

²⁸ *Ibid.*

friends, never avenge yourselves. Leave that to God. For it is written, ‘I will take vengeance; I will repay those who deserve it,’ says the LORD.”

While the emphasis here has been persecution *by Christians*, I am mindful of the fact that Christians in other countries are currently undergoing violent persecution today. I have in front of me a picture of several pairs of worn shoes, sandals and sneakers; shoes left outside a Christian church and belonging to those killed and injured in a vicious attack against Christians. May we be aware of the suffering currently being endured by Christians and pray for their faith, their strength, and an end to their suffering.