

Book Review

Marian Hillar, *The Case of Michael Servetus: The Turning Point in the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience*, Edwin Mellen Press, 1997.

Marian Hillar's telling account of institutionalized repression of freedom in religion, thought and conscience should be compulsory reading in all universities. Using the full weight of accumulating evidence and encompassing the time from the beginning of Christianity up to the present, Hillar has given a compressed history of Christianity, the development of doctrine as well as an account of the recurring horror of religious intolerance expressed in the elimination of the enemy "heretic." Five chapters detail the early development of the Christian faith as it proceeded in post-biblical times to enact its dogmatic decisions at the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. The politicizing of the faith was nothing short of a disaster. The right of freedom of thought and disagreement with "orthodoxy" drove dissenters into isolation, while the church, paradoxically and dishonestly appealing to Scripture, granted itself the right to take the life of rebels against the ecclesiastical system. According to Hillar this persecution for the sake of ideas was "a testimony to the moral and intellectual degeneracy of the entire Christian movement after the fourth century" (395).

Established religion of both Roman Catholic and Protestant brands has been guilty of the tendency to whitewash the "mistakes" of their chosen heroes, in particular John Calvin. Hillar fills a necessary gap in our knowledge by introducing and describing in historical as well as theological detail the awful episode in which the brilliant Spanish doctor, geographer and linguist Michael Servetus was burned at the stake by the Protestant Calvin. The reformer added a further barbarism to his horrifyingly cruel treatment of Servetus by using the strong arm of the ecclesiastical power of the Church of Rome to execute the heretical offender. The offense was nothing more than a brilliant critique of the tangled doctrine of the Trinity which modern scholarship is much more ready to admit is not found in the pages of canonical Scripture.

With part one of Hillar's work covering the historical evolution of the principle of religious intolerance and part two the account of the life and death of Servetus, Hillar devotes part three to the significance of the lessons to be learned from the murder of a Christian who was far in advance of his times, not only medically but in the area of biblical scholarship. For Marian Hillar — and his passion for the subject comes through on every page — Servetus should be ranked amongst the true martyrs for freedom of independent inquiry and scholarship. He is the fountainhead of anti-Trinitarianism and stands for a movement much broader in its significance than simply the confrontation with a single doctrine. The Socinians in Poland and the Radical Reformation in its anti-Trinitarian and Anabaptist forms were the true descendants of Servetus. Their plea for tolerance and freedom in biblical inquiry should be recalled in every generation. They present a warning to the comfortably "orthodox" that their orthodoxy may be no more than an ecclesiastical dogmatism inculcated without careful examination of the history of doctrine and, most important, the Bible itself. We are in debt to Marian Hillar for his exhaustive investigation of the original sources and the production of an overwhelming and often stirring account of the battle for freedom from misguided religious zeal.

Hillar's work will inform and inspire all who treasure the precious right to freedom from violence perpetrated in the name of religion. It may well cause many to wonder about the unwarranted reverence paid to reformers whose dark side calls in question the almost god-like qualities with which some have invested them. The death of the lonely Spanish heretic at the hands of Calvin in 1553 marks the apogee of misdirected zeal. Hillar calls us to consider the fact that Servetus was in fact the instigator of a new Reformation of the Christian faith. How well Servetus' cry for reform was heeded may be judged by the fact that only three copies of his *Christianismi Restitutio* survive, and two of these show signs of damage, possibly by fire.

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