

Laboratories of tolerance

Rethinking Sebastian Castellio and his legacy

Geneva, 7-8 November 2024

Ever since Ferdinand Buisson's classic biography first brought to light the details of his life and thought, Sebastian Castellio (1515-1563) has been hailed as a hero in the history of toleration. Widely credited with having produced the first systematic defence of religious toleration in Western thought with his *De haereticis, an sint persequendi* (1554), he has been given a prominent role in all major narratives about the rise of the modern notion of tolerance. His life has drawn the fascination of scholars and non-academic audiences alike, and has been celebrated through studies, public monuments, and even comic books. His clash with John Calvin in the wake of the execution of Michael Servetus in 1553, famously memorialised by Stefan Zweig as a brave struggle against dogmatism, authoritarianism, and intolerance, is still remembered as one of the defining episodes in the intellectual and religious history of its time, and has shaped general views on Calvin as much as on Castellio himself.

In an attempt to rectify the partial picture of Castellio's historical significance that has been produced by an excessive focus on his tolerationist work, in recent years scholars have turned to different aspects of his oeuvre. New prominence has been given to his work as a philologist, Biblical scholar, and translator, thereby enriching our understanding of the multiple legacies of this many-sided figure. At the same time, although interest in his tolerationist ideas still remains strong, some scholars have begun to reflect on the limitations of previous accounts of Castellio's thought on the question of tolerance, with their tendency to exaggerate his singularity and their disproportionate glorification of his historical importance. Together, these developments in Castellio scholarship point to a growing urge to rethink our view of Castellio's thought and activities and to seek a more balanced appreciation of his intellectual output.

Building on these recent studies, this two-day workshop will tackle head-on the shortcomings of traditional narratives and look with fresh eyes at Castellio's work in relation to the question of tolerance. While giving due weight to the significance of his pioneering contribution to the development of the idea of toleration, we nonetheless aim to revisit received historiographical notions and assumptions by bringing to the fore new aspects of Castellio's context. What role did Castellio's friends and collaborators play in shaping and disseminating his ideas? How were his ideas received by his contemporaries? And how does Castellio's thought fit within wider developments in the history of tolerationist thought? By promoting new conversations around these and other questions, while eschewing a biased, uncritical, and overly celebratory approach to the subject, the workshop will lay the groundwork for a new and enriched picture of Castellio and his legacy.

If you are interested in presenting a contribution, please submit your CV alongside a proposal, including a title and abstract (max 300 words), by emailing one of the organisers: Brigitte Hilmer (brigitte.hilmer@unibas.ch), Odile Panetta (odile.panetta@cas.au.dk), or Ueli Zahnd (ueli.zahnd@unige.ch). The deadline for submissions is **30 June 2024**.



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