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Religious Liberty: Our Baptist Heritage

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Writing in 1987 the distinguished American Baptist scholar Harry Leon McBeth said this:

For almost four centuries Baptists have insisted upon complete religious liberty not only for themselves but also for others. In no other area has Baptist witness proved clearer or more consistent than in their struggle for the right of persons to answer to God and not to government for religious beliefs and behaviour. Baptists were born in travail for freedom to differ from a state church, and they have resisted every effort, whether from civil or ecclesiastical authorities, to force them into religious conformity.²

We passed the four hundred year mark in 2012, and still Baptists worldwide continue to seek to live out the truth of McBeth's assertion that a concern for religious freedom is part of our DNA as Baptists.

Of course we want to say immediately that we have not always lived up to this high ideal or lived out its implications or actively campaigned for religious freedom on behalf of others beside ourselves. But it remains at very core of our identity and is one of our distinguishing characteristics.

My impossible task in the short time given to me is to probe a bit further into our European Baptist history to see why it is that religious freedom is so important to us.

The letter to the Hebrews describes our Christian journey as one in which we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and this is also true when we come to think about Baptists and religious freedom.

From this great cloud I want to invite just two of the witnesses to step forward and present themselves to us. They are Thomas Helwys and Julius Köbner. They lived in the 17th and 19th centuries respectively. They represent the two beginnings of Baptist life on the continent of Europe. As I focus on these Baptist defenders of religious liberty I hope that something of their story and their passion will shine a light on the questions and the challenges that Baptists have had to wrestle with in this area.

THOMAS HELWYS: An Advocate of Religious Freedom for All

My first witness is Thomas Helwys (1575?-1616?), the co-leader with John Smyth of the very first Baptist church, founded in Amsterdam, and then the leader of the first Baptist church established in England in the year 1612. Helwys was a layman who

¹ This paper was written by Tony Peck, but presented in Sofia by Toivo Pilli, since Tony had to leave due to family circumstances.

² Harry L. McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Witness* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987), p. 252.

received his education as lawyer in London. He came from the wealthier part of English society, being a landowner and what the English call a ‘gentleman’.

Helwys was also one of those who came to believe that the Church of England, which everyone was commanded to belong to, was corrupt and not capable of reformation, even by the puritans within it. The King – James I – believed in the divine right of kings to determine his subjects’ religion, and though he came from Presbyterian Scotland, he decided to enforce conformity to the Church of England.

Helwys, in the early years of the 17th century, separated himself from the Church of England at a time when this was illegal, and he joined a group of Separatists in Lincolnshire in eastern England, led by John Smyth. The Separatists were subject to persecution and eventually some of them decided to go to Amsterdam which was then a ‘free city’ that tolerated such groups. Smyth and Helwys led a group there in 1608. It met in a bakery next to the River Amstel and there they developed the core elements of what we would think of as Baptist identity. They practised believers’ baptism and a simple form of worship. These first Baptists also met and came under the influence of Dutch Mennonites, the Waterlanders, as well as the free grace theology of the contemporary Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius, that modified the Calvinism of English Separatism from which they had come.

The first (though by no means the last!) spilt in a Baptist church took place in that first church as Helwys and Smyth disagreed theologically. Smyth and part of the group moved closer to the Mennonites and eventually joined the Waterlanders. Helwys began to think that it had been wrong to flee the difficult situation in England. So he led the rest of the group back to the hostile environment of London where he started the first Baptist church in 1612.

Whilst still in Amsterdam, Helwys has been working on a book setting out his view of the church situation in England. He did this against the background of his belief in the imminent Apocalypse as foretold in the Book of Revelation. He was convinced that he was living in the end times, that nobody else in England seemed to recognise it, and that it was his duty to call the nation to repentance.

He identifies the beasts of the book of Revelation, as the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, the Puritans, and even the Separatists from which he had come. The book certainly lacks a certain ecumenical grace and in the end there is a sense of ‘I only am left’ so far as Helwys and this handful of the first Baptists are concerned.

Nevertheless in the middle of his diatribe against the Church of England and its Bishops, Helwys addresses directly the issues of the King having sole authority over his subjects’ consciences and how they will worship. He says that the king does not have ‘power to command men’s consciences in the greatest things to be submitted to’. And he follows with what historians agree is the first plea for *religious freedom for all* in the English language. And whilst it is probably best to forget most of the rest of the book, this treasure in its midst has guaranteed Helwys’ honoured place in Baptist history. This is what he wrote in *A Short Declaration on the Mystery of Iniquity*:

For we do freely profess that our lord the king has no more power over their consciences than over ours, and that is none at all. For our lord the king is but an earthly king, and he has no authority as a king but in earthly causes. And if the king’s people be obedient and true subjects,

obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord the king can require no more. For men's religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure. This is made evident to our lord the king by the scriptures.

In his preface to one copy of the book, that is now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, Helyws addresses the King directly.

Helwys is careful to say that he wants to be a loyal subject of the King in all worldly matters. Unlike the Anabaptists Helwys was not a pacifist. He believed that it was the duty of himself and people who thought like him to defend the nation in military conflict if necessary. In that sense he still saw in King James the Calvinist 'godly prince'. And unlike the Anabaptists, and his former colleague John Smyth, Helwys believed that it was possible for a Christian to be a magistrate, in other words to participate in government and the dispensing of justice.

But in matters of conscience and religion Helwys believed that the king has no power over his subjects. And he further asserted that this freedom of conscience and religious beliefs and practices should be for all, even those with whom Helwys had been in such profound disagreement and whom he had devastatingly criticised in his book. And even for heretics and Muslims (Turks). Helwys of course could not conceive of people being atheist in his time.

Now this is something radically new in the England of 1612. Thirty years later when the English got rid of their king and had a republic for 20 years many were putting forward ideas of religious freedom. But not in 1612. Helwys was something of a lonely prophet.

So where did Helwys get his notion of religious freedom for all? Well, it could be partly the logical outcome of Separatism, that if you separate yourself from the state Church you want religious freedom for yourself as a marginalised minority and for others. It could be something as an interim ethics for the end times to give people the freedom to come to God and repent. Then, Helwys had been trained as a lawyer and in the late 16th century legal writings of well known jurists, such as Alberico Gentili who taught at Cambridge University, included ideas of toleration of religious diversity.

But a large factor must be the result of Helwys' contact with Anabaptist thinking for the previous century in the form of the Dutch Waterlander Mennonites.

The founder of the Mennonites, Menno Simons had famously said that to 'throttle the truth' or to defend lies 'with the sword' is not the way of Christ. And others like Hans Denck made statements on religious freedom for all that were very close to Helwys in their language. For example, Hans Denck stated, describing his view of religious toleration: 'Such a security will exist also in outward things, with practice of the true gospel that each will let the other move and dwell in peace – be he Turk or heathen, believing what he will – through and in his land, not submitting to a magistrate in matters of faith.'³ The difference was that whereas the Anabaptists were making these

³ Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline* (Waterloo, ONT, and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), p. 292.

statements as isolated groups cut off from society on the very margins of Europe, Helwys was speaking truth to power, and the highest power in the land, the King.

Two other points I want to draw attention to here. First of all Helwys' theological starting point is a high view of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Just as the book of Revelation has as its backdrop the struggle between Christ and Caesar, so Helwys wants to assert that if Jesus Christ is Lord, he is Lord of every person's conscience and there can be no other Lords or Kings of that. Consequently, religious freedom for Baptists was not first of all argued on the basis of the self-evident inalienable rights of human beings, as it would be in the later 18th century at the time of the French and American revolutions; but on the basis of a theological understanding of the scope of the sovereignty of God and the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Helwys also argued that the Gospel was always offered freely in the New Testament, with people able to accept or reject it according to conviction and conscience, without it being enforced by government or the sword.

And secondly we have to ask what the English society would have looked like if Helwys' bold plea for religious freedom for all would have been put into practice? In a situation of the total dominance of the State Church in all areas of life it would have led to a very different society that would have embraced diversity in religious matters. In other words, whether he realised it, or more probably not, Helwys was laying the foundations of a political theology that would change the very nature of society. And in some ways the logical outcome of his thinking is a 'secular' state that guarantees religious freedom for all.

Whether the King read the copy of the book that Helwys addressed to him is not known. What is known is that Helwys was put in to Newgate prison in London and probably died there in 1615 or 1616. However, those he influenced and who came immediately afterwards, like John Murton and Leonard Busher, carried forward the leadership of the church and Helwys' ideas about religious freedom in their writing. Then in the 1640s and 1650s during the Republic or Commonwealth in England these ideas flourished and the Baptist movement grew both in its Arminian and Calvinist streams, known as General and Particular Baptists.

The historian John Coffey has documented the way in which in the mid-17th century Baptists and others did not find it easy to come to terms with the universal nature of Helwys' plea for religious freedom. Some wanted to exclude Roman Catholics for instance. So a debate grew up which is still with us today about the limitations of religious freedom, not least about one of Helwys' original categories, Muslims and Islam.

There is a direct line of influence from Helwys to Roger Williams, a Calvinistic Baptist who wrote a treatise on religious freedom, and then went out to the New World to Rhode Island where he was briefly a Baptist. But the ideas he brought influenced the Constitution of Rhode Island and eventually the American Constitution itself with ideals of religious freedom for all, and what it perhaps rather misleadingly termed the 'wall of separation' between church and state.

So there is my first witness Thomas Helwys, courageous advocate of religious freedom for all and whose influence went through England and on to the New world and the United States of America.

JULIUS KÖBNER: A Vision for Freedom as an Inalienable Right

The early Baptist beginnings, in Amsterdam and England, did not at that time bear fruit in the spread of the Baptist movement throughout continental Europe. That had to wait over 200 years to the mid-19th century and British and American Baptist support for the vision and missionary zeal of the German Johannes Gerhard Oncken. Starting in Hamburg in the 1830s Oncken sent his missionaries all over Europe and deep into Russia. He is truly called ‘the father of European Baptists’ and many of our EBF member Unions owe their origins to his work and influence.

Oncken is sometimes seen a missionary pragmatist who did not easily embrace a Baptist ecclesiology, and was interested in religious freedom only in so far as it eased the situation of persecution of the Baptists in Germany and smoothed the path for the Gospel elsewhere in Europe. The English father of modern mission, William Carey, had a similar view, declaring religious freedom to be a ‘glorious door’ open for the spread of the Gospel.

Oncken also believed that nations could embrace religious and political freedom only on the basis of the Word of God. He saw the revolutions of 1848 in Germany and elsewhere as signs of this. He said: ‘It is only where the Word of God has struck its roots deep in the heart of the people, that men enjoy the highest political freedom. The Bible and the Bible alone is the guarantee of freedom to an emancipated world.’

However, our second witness for religious freedom was more focused on issues of religious freedom in his historical context. His name is Julius Köbner (1806-84), who was together with Oncken part of what was called the ‘*Kleeblatt*’ or 3-leafed clover of the pioneer leadership of the German Baptist Mission: Oncken, Köbner and Gottfried Lehmann.

Köbner was born in to a Jewish family in Denmark. When he and his wife moved to Hamburg they came in to contact with the Baptists, and he underwent conversion and baptism. He became very active in the Baptist movement and was several times jailed for illegal religious activities. Together with Oncken he was instrumental in beginning the Baptist work in Denmark.

The German Baptist theologian Erich Geldbach has done a lot of work on Köbner, some of it in English. He comments on Köbner’s understanding of religious liberty and the dominant monopoly of the State Church that was itself ruled by princes or, in the case of Hamburg, the city council:

Köbner considered this arrangement of church and state incompatible with Holy Scripture. He made use of the Bible to explain his point of view. The state church is in a state of slavery in Egypt and is being used to build pyramids which serve the glory of humans, not the glory of God. Whereas Luther had contended that the church of his day was in Babylonian captivity, Köbner took it a stage further back in holy history and declared that the church of his day was enslaved in Egypt.

Remember that Köbner had personally experienced harassment, persecution and imprisonment for being a Baptist, as were many others. He saw hope in the revolutionary events of 1848 that brought about a parliament in Frankfurt and a remarkable bill of rights that included religious freedom. These hopes were not to be realised in the years that followed but it inspired Köbner to write what he called the *Manifesto of the Fee Primitive Christianity to the German People*. The title was deliberate. A few months earlier Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had published their 'Communist Manifesto'. Köbner's aim was to use some of their language to show that a return to New Testament Christianity was the only way to rid society of bourgeois oppression and emancipate the proletariat. He said that 'apostolically minded Christians' not militant proletarians were the means by which 'God had ripped apart the chains of bourgeois oppression'. Like Helwys, his view of religious freedom formed the basis of a vision of a different kind of society.

Köbner's vision was of a society that had returned to New Testament principles as being the truly revolutionary movement. Those who would be true Christians in the Germany of 1848, he asserted, should 'refrain from all human rules, forms and pretexts and should return to original Christianity'.

A foundational part of all this vision was a church that had freedom from state control and persecution. 'Every ruling church is a persecuting inquisitory one, whether it be Roman or Protestant', Köbner declared.

And these are his words on religious freedom:

We do not receive this precious freedom only today from some benevolent state power; we have the past fifteen years considered it our inalienable right and continuously enjoyed it even at the expenses of our earthly possessions and freedom. But we maintain not only our won religious liberty, we demand it for every human being who inhabits the soil of the fatherland, we demand it equally for all, be they Christians, Jews, Mohammedans or whatever. We consider it not only a totally unchristian sin to lay the iron fist of coercion upon any human with regard to his/her way of worshipping God, we also believe that the advantage of each religious party demands a totally equal right of all.

Notice the almost identical language to Helwys about the scope of religious freedom, which is interesting, as Helwys was largely forgotten for nearly three centuries and interest in him revised only at the beginning of the 20th century. Also, one immediately notices the enlightenment language of inalienable rights. Köbner concludes his remarks: 'Do not be mistaken! We will not have true religious freedom as long as some religious party or other remains in a relationship with the state or the state has oversight of religion.'

And the Manifesto ends with these stirring words:

Now precious German people, make a decision between hypocrisy and truth, between true Christianity and churchly clergydom, between reasonable biblical conviction of heart and unreasonable castles in the air. May the spirit of Jesus Christ lead you in your inquiry that you may be successful and that you may become like Him who knew neither egoism nor hypocrisy. 'If you continue you in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free... So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed'. (John 8.31 – 32.36)

Eric Geldbach comments that this powerful writing by Köbner was so revolutionary that he was not only attacked by ministers of the state church, but his tract was taken off the market and destroyed by the reactionary forces in Germany that soon replaced the revolutionary ones.

Baptists continued to be persecuted, and in this they received a lot of support from British Baptists and the newly formed British Evangelical Alliance some of whose leaders had influence with top officials at the British foreign office. For instance, in the 1850s the small Baptist community in the German State of Sax-Meiningen was prohibited from observing the Lord's Supper and their pastor was banned from visiting homes. An appeal from Edward Steane, Secretary of the British Baptist Union and the British Evangelical Alliance directly to the German Minister of the Interior resulted in a degree of liberty being granted.

This brings into our attention another issue that has been important for Baptists in their struggle for religious liberty. That they needed to work in co-operation with other bodies, both interdenominational bodies like the evangelical alliance, and also government powers where possible.

Köbner himself seemed to moderate his tone as the years went on and the Baptist movement in Germany became less counter-cultural overall and more adjusted to the powers that be.

This adjustment to the powers was to prove a particular dilemma for German Baptists less than 100 years later in the Nazi period when in return for greater freedom for their churches to evangelise they had to surrender their freedom to criticise the Nazi State and indeed on occasion defended it. The German Baptist historian Andrea Strübind entitled her book about that period 'The Un-Free Free Church'.

It raises a question, which was articulated by none other than Dietrich Bonhoeffer as to what price has to be paid by way of gratitude for a measure of religious freedom given by a state. In another form it was the genuine dilemma for some of the Baptist unions that Oncken helped to found when they faced the persecution of atheistic communism in the 20th century. How far could they accommodate to the state in order to preserve a measure of freedom for the church to live and worship and not inflict such harsh suffering on their members. But where was the line drawn where Christian principles were absolute and not to be compromised, often driving the church underground. That was the famous split in Russian Baptists in the 1960s, a breach that has not been healed until today. Is compromise an acceptable price to pay in order to have a limited freedom for worship within church buildings? Or should believers protest publicly and refuse any cooperation with the state, and even suffer, as a sign that a freedom to evangelise and raise their children within Christian tradition is their inalienable right? Trevor Beeson called this dilemma behind the iron curtain 'Discretion or Valour' – that is the title of his influential book. From within the communist atheistic state system, the Baptist believers saw the dilemma even in a more dramatic language: it was a matter of being or not being faithful to the Lord.

CONCLUSION

Questions related to religious freedom are part of who the Baptists are. However, the argumentation regarding what is the value of religious freedom, and how and why it should be implemented, has varied through centuries, as the wider context has changed. This presentation has taken as its focus two main proponents of religious freedom from Baptist perspective: Thomas Helwys and Julius Köbner.

The first was part of the Baptist beginnings in Holland and England, in the 17th century, and the other was part of the emerging Baptist story on the continental Europe in the 19th century. Helwys emphasised that the King, the ‘political’ power, has only limited authority over the citizens. It has power to command the subjects’ lives and bodies, but has no right to meddle with their relationship with God, which was only between God and human beings – free from earthly coercion or forceful demands, whether these concern way of worship or way of believing and convictions.

Julius Köbner, living in the context of the 19th century cultural upheavals, especially regarding the awareness towards social betterment, was convinced that religion and practice of faith should be free from state control and any persecution. Including the pressures coming from the mainline or majority churches towards minority religious bodies. Köbner’s *Manifesto of the Free Primitive Christianity to the German People*, published in 1848, had social and even political aspects – and the document expressed the view that return to the New Testament Christianity was the way to rid the society from bourgeois oppression. Like in the case of Helwys, also Köbner’s vision – if developed further – made an attempt to lay foundations for a different kind of society.

Present questions regarding religious freedom may be somewhat different, but can be derived from the earlier discussion within Baptist or baptistic circles over the centuries. What would be the consequences in culture and on social areas of life if religious freedom for all would be a widespread and default practice? What are the differences of practicing religious freedom as a private privilege or as a public principle? What happens and what ethical and theological guidelines would be necessary if religious freedom of one would conflict with the religious freedom of other? Who are the partners in the Baptist strive for religious freedom?