

*RELIGIOUS FREEDOM – A KEY BAPTIST CONVICTION*

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# Religious Freedom

## A KEY BAPTIST CONVICTION



## Religious Freedom – A Key Baptist Conviction

Among the very first group of believers who met in Amsterdam in 1609 along with John Smyth was Thomas Helwys. Helwys (c.1550 – c.1616) was a long-standing friend and supporter of Smyth. After Smyth joined the Mennonites, Helwys returned to London together with a small group who formed the first Baptist church in England. Around this time, he was also writing a book called *A Short Declaration on the Mystery of Iniquity*.

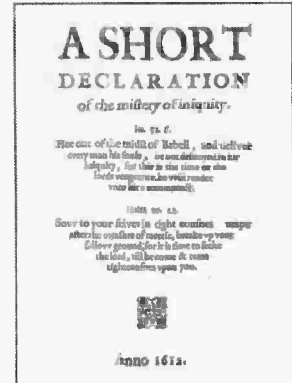
He was mainly talking about the hierarchical structures of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches of his day. But within this argument, he addresses King James, declaring that the King has no power over the consciences of his subjects, and that all should be free to believe according to their consciences without fear of punishment. For Helwys, the plea was not very successful. He was cast into prison where he died a few years later.

Yet, the call he issued has remained central to Baptist identity ever since.

### The Biblical Basis of Religious Freedom

Neither Helwys, nor more importantly the Bible, use the actual phrase “religious freedom” or “religious liberty”. But this does not mean that the freedom to follow and worship God in the way the individual in community sees fit is not present in the Bible. It is a fundamental presupposition, for example, of the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy (see Exodus 31:12-17). No ruler is to prevent people from giving time to honour and praise God on the Sabbath. The prophets and the historical books of the Old Testament constantly complain of those kings and false prophets who seek to prevent their people from being true followers of God (see for example the story of Manasseh, 2Kings 21:1-16 or Micah 3:1-12).

In the New Testament, there are a number of passages which touch on religious freedom. For example, the stories of call: people who hear the call of Christ must be free to respond to it. Whether it be fishermen leaving their boats (Mark 1:16-20) or tax-collectors their booths (Matthew 9:9), there is a



direct freedom to respond to Christ who calls each by name. No power has the right or ultimately the ability to stand against this (Romans 8:38-39).

Moreover, as the community of the called (the *ekklesia*), the church must be able to exist in freedom. Otherwise, there can be no true response to Christ's call to join a community of other believers. Thus, states should not prevent the coming together of God's faithful, nor should they prevent them from carrying out their God-given task of witnessing to their faith. The task of discipling the peoples around us begins with Jesus saying "All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:19). It cannot be rulers or governments who decide on whether Christians should be allowed to proclaim the Good News, for they have no authority to do so.

Freedom is a frequent theme in Paul. The fifth chapter of Galatians famously begins with the affirmation that "For freedom Christ has set us free." The fact that Christ has set us free – from sin, from death, from hatred and despair – means that, as Romans 8 reminds us, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, no sort of alien power, earthly or spiritual. Paul, surprised on the road to Damascus by the freedom to be free, never lost sight of this gift of God and returned to it frequently. His rejection of the Law is not a rejection of Judaism, but of anything that is used to inhibit the freedom to respond fully to the Good News of salvation in Christ Jesus.

### The Theology of Religious Freedom

Thomas Helwys argued primarily from theological grounds. Religious freedom was, for him, connected in the first place to the importance of conscience. This follows from the stress on the free decision of each person to commit herself or himself to Christ. A believers' church, another key Baptist characteristic, will argue for religious freedom, since belief which is not freely assented to and lived out cannot be true belief. There is an old philosophical maxim which says that "ought" implies "can". That is to say, if we ought to do something, it must be something that in fact we are able to do. Nowhere is this truer than in matters of faith.

When the Holy Spirit speaks within us, when we hear the voice of our consciences, we must be free to respond in good faith to that call. Of course, it is necessary to make sure that what we hear truly is the voice of God calling us, but Helwys acknowledged that even those he thought most wrong should be free to follow their beliefs. "Men's religion is between men and God", said Helwys, and it is not the King's task to decide on what they believe.

Baptists are Christ-centred people, and this too is a reason why religious

freedom is so important. To follow Christ is to seek to become ever more conformed to Christ, and in Jesus we see someone who is perfectly free. There is no compulsion in Christ, no forcing people to believe, but always the offer of the possibility of belief. "All things can be done for the one who believes", Jesus tells us (Mark 9:23). That belief is not a heavy burden, but rather something light and easy to bear (Matthew 11:28-30). Jesus freely gives himself to the Father for our sake, praying only that the Father's will be done (Luke 22:42). The freedom to be children of the Father is something we learn from the freedom of the Son.



For Helwys, there was also another reason for religious freedom, touching on a further Baptist trait, the centrality of the Scriptures in the life of the believer. A large part of his argument against the majority Christian traditions of his time concerns who has the right to interpret the Bible. Is it only members of the hierarchy, appointed, he reminds the King not very subtly, not by God but by the King himself? Or are all those who have responded to the call of the true heavenly King, Christ, able to read and understand for themselves the word of God as recorded in the Bible?

Here, too, someone marked by faith, the believer who has firmly committed himself or herself to Christ, must be free to encounter God as revealed in the Scriptures, to understand the word of God spoken in the Bible, spoken most fully in Christ, the Word made flesh. No one else can decide for them what that encounter should be, for to do so would be to seek to limit the power of God's Spirit to speak to each alone and in community.

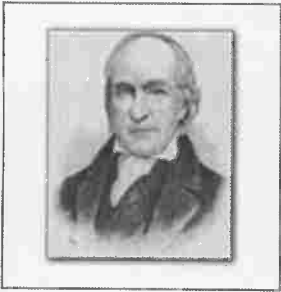
### The Development of the Idea of Religious Freedom

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Baptists, especially in America, were important defenders of the necessity to allow freedom of belief. This was not seen as a "right", for rights only started to be talked about later, especially in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As for Helwys, it was rather a consequence of other fundamental beliefs.

Baptists, or those inspired by their beliefs and practices, were fundamental to the guarantee of religious freedom in the American Constitution. In 1636 Roger Williams (1603–1683), who at least at one point in his life was a Baptist, founded the colony of Rhode Island where all were guaranteed liberty of conscience.

Roger Williams





John Leland



Isaac Backus

Later people such as Isaac Backus (1724–1806) and John Leland (1754–1841) were influential in ensuring that the separation of Church and State and a commitment to religious liberty were enshrined in the Constitution. This served as an example to other new nations that came into existence in the nineteenth century and who were inspired by the American Constitution.

In parts of the Caribbean, especially Jamaica, Baptists, inspired by the recognition that religious freedom and the emancipation from slavery could not be divorced from each other, were important figures in the fight for the abolition of slavery. The first Baptist preachers in Jamaica were two former slaves, and Baptists have played a crucial part in the history of the island. The African and Baptist traditions which took the preachers to Jamaica from America was also integral to the thought of Rev Martin Luther King Jr. and his leadership of the struggle for equal rights for all citizens, regardless of ethnicity. This is ultimately a question of religious freedom, since it is about the freedom of each to be brother and sister to the other, as God willed. Any attempts to make some more or less important because of the colour of their skin, language, gender or whatever other category the state chooses is an attack on the freedom to worship God when and with whom and as we are called.

### What are we free to do?

Because we are made free for the sake of freedom, we must exercise our freedom in a responsible way, for the building up of God's kingdom and the mutual support of fellow Christians. Thus, it is important to be clear about what we can claim under the heading of religious freedom.

As we have seen, the most fundamental freedom is to be disciples of Christ. This means being able to make the choice, without pressure from anyone else, to commit our lives to Christ, and to live out the commitment we make. The other freedoms follow from this.

One is the freedom to read the Bible, and so the freedom to own and to pass on copies of the Bible. It also means that there can be no State-imposed interpretation of the message of the Bible, since that does not fall within the State's authority. We must be free to reflect on the Biblical message and

The Reverend  
Dr Martin Luther King



to convey it to others, in a way which always respects their own freedom.

There must be freedom also to choose which church one belongs to, both in terms of denomination and in terms of local community. The early English Baptists in the seventeenth-century did not agree with the notion that everyone had to belong to an established state church and attend services in the local parish church. People, as Helwys argued, were to be at liberty to belong to a congregation where they felt God called them to be, to worship God as they saw fit, according to their understanding of Scripture and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. For some or even many, this may be in the majority church of a country or region, but this could not be imposed from the side of the state.

Today, especially, people should be free to witness to their faith. As Paul makes clear, Christianity is not a faith which we can keep for ourselves, but the Good News is something we have to proclaim, each in our own way according to our own gifts and talents and circumstances (1 Corinthians 9). To prevent someone from doing that is to limit their freedom to live their faith, since it is such an integral part of what it is to believe.

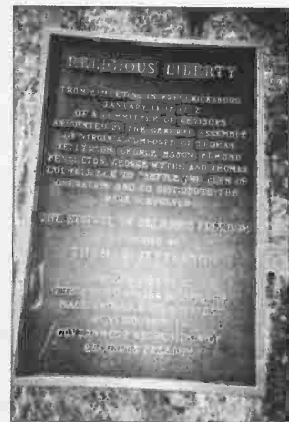
### Some Challenges of Religious Freedom

A commitment to religious freedom will bring challenges. Some of these are obvious. Thomas Helwys, as mentioned above, was imprisoned shortly after writing *On the Mystery of Iniquity* and almost certainly died in prison. Many others have been persecuted and killed because of their refusal to accept attempts to limit their ability and freedom to be children and servants of the Lord. It can clearly be dangerous to support the cause of religious freedom.

There is also the danger that, if we have religious freedom, we withdraw from any interaction with state and allow other evils to flourish. Separation of Church and State has never meant indifference to what the State does. Christians can support the State in what it does that is good and oppose it in what it does that is bad. Otherwise, religious freedom is not for freedom but for the tyranny of others.



African  
American Baptist  
congregation



Memorial to  
Thomas Jefferson's  
Statute on  
Religious Liberty

Perhaps the biggest challenge of religious freedom is one that was already noted and accepted by Helwys. Religious freedom must mean what it says. Before God, people must be free to respond in whatever form they wish. For some, this will mean embracing Christ as their Saviour, for others it may mean following another faith, for others still it may mean rejecting all faith. Thus, we have to be prepared to let Muslims be free to be Muslims, Buddhists to be Buddhists, atheists to be atheists, and so on.

This does not mean that we have to agree with them. Nor does it mean that in a spirit of loving service and solidarity, we cannot, by our lives and when appropriate by our words, share with them what is most precious to us, our faith. But it does mean that we cannot demand that their freedom be curtailed, including their freedom to witness to their beliefs. Most legal documents concerning religious freedom say that the right is a fundamental one, which can only be limited when it is used to abuse other rights, such as the right to life. Thus, only in very exceptional circumstances can we think that there should be limits on the public representation of certain religious beliefs. Privately, moreover, people remain always free to believe what they want, even if we are convinced that they are wrong.

A commitment to religious freedom includes a deep commitment to trust in God, to allow God to work in His own mysterious way and to recognise that, above all, as humans and creatures, we must allow God our Creator to be free. In this sense, religious freedom is the ultimate guarantee against all forms of idolatry and ideology.

### Working for Religious Freedom Today

In a perfect world, there would be no need to keep stressing the importance of religious freedom. It is enshrined in the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights, proclaimed and adopted in December 1948, which was further developed in the 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, and which has influenced documents from the Council of Europe, the Organization of American States, the African Union, and the Arab League.

However, we do not live in a perfect world, and legal requirements and documents have not been enough to ensure religious freedom in many countries in the world today. Baptists face restrictions in far too many places still. Some of these are legal restrictions which prevent Baptists from owning their churches or being recognised as a legitimate body of people. In other countries there is active persecution, leading to false arrest, imprisonment and vio-

lence against pastors and members of congregations.

Always remembering that our commitment to religious freedom is a commitment to religious freedom for all, there are things which those who live in relative freedom can do to help. The first thing we must do is pray. For our brothers and sisters who suffer for their faith, it is a great comfort and strength to know that they are held up before the Lord by people throughout the world. Moreover, we firmly believe that God can work miracles in the heart of the most stubborn sinner, so we must pray for the conversion of those in authority.

Alongside prayer, we can also use various sources of information to find out what is going on in terms of abuses of religious freedom. We can write to embassies and to leaders of countries where these abuses take place. It remains true that politicians are affected by public opinion and to pressure from other countries. Our letters should be polite and courteous, reminding the countries of their commitments under international law, and asking for investigations into particular allegations and for justice and freedom for all citizens, regardless of religious affiliation.

We can also support those Baptists who have as a more full-time ministry the struggle for the implementation of religious freedom. Our support will again be often in the form of prayer. But we can also see if our congregation cannot try once a year at least to offer some financial support for this work, and we can respond to requests for help and seek out ways of aiding these people in their ministries.

### Looking Forward

As Baptists, we should rightly treasure the commitment to religious freedom which has been one of our hallmarks over the past four centuries. We should honour our brothers and sisters who have contributed so much in this respect, and our honouring of them will always include a deep commitment to carry forward their work.

Ultimately, our desire for religious freedom is no more, and no less, than our desire to follow faithfully Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The gift of faith is all to us, and nothing should stand in the way of our full and joyful acceptance of this gift, and the living of the life of loving service which it entails. We must be allowed the freedom to proclaim from the rooftops this great and abounding wonder, that Christ has died to save us, and that our life is a life in Him through the Spirit to the glory of the Father.



## WHY RELIGIOUS MINORITIES SHOULD HAVE THE SAME RIGHTS AS MAJORITY RELIGIONS

*Christer Daelander, International Secretary of the Baptist Union of Sweden and the EBF Religious Freedom Representative (March 2008)*

I'm sitting with a small group of Christians from Turkmenistan. They are young and enthusiastic in their faith. They have devoted their lives to what they believe is right and good. They want to do well for their families, their people and their country and for God who they believe is the Creator of the World and the inspiration of good. But some weeks before I met them they were gathered in a home for prayer and Bible reading, and suddenly the local police came in, interrupted the meeting and started to cross-examine the participants, first the women and the children and then the men. Bibles and songbooks were confiscated. Why did this happen? Turkmenistan has signed all the international documents on religious freedom and human rights and still most groups of believers of different religions experience harassment by the authorities and sometimes imprisonment and torture.

The world is changing rapidly and the possibilities of communication between continents, countries and people are more developed now than ever before. One of the main reasons for wars and conflicts is usually a lack of understanding of the other party and the fear of what is different to what you are used to. The communication systems should be a help to overcome this, but instead we can see a continuation of wars, conflicts and an increasing number of crimes against humanity and the violation of minority religions. Why is this so? FEAR! Fear of the unknown - fear of losing your identity - fear of losing your safe zone. Sadly one reaction to this is isolation. In your isolation you can continue to nurture your misconception of your neighbour. But if you meet and exchange ideas with your neighbours of other faiths, in a humble and respectful way, your eyes will be opened and you will understand each other better and even start to like each other. That's why it is important to meet with neighbours of other faiths and other ideas. And that's one reason for giving different religious groupings a free space of action in our countries without discriminating against them.

The people in Sweden believed in the Asa religion in the 9th and 10th centuries. They believed in different gods, often related to the major natural forces, the thunder, the harvest, love etc. The Christian religion came to Sweden in the 9th century, but it became rooted first in the 11th century. Christianity was a minority religion at that time, but now it is the majority religion, especially the Lutheran Church which was the state Church until 2000. In the 16th cen-

tury the Lutheran Church became the Official State religion. It was the only accepted religion in Sweden and when the Baptist movement came to Sweden in the mid-19th century the Baptists were persecuted, sometimes imprisoned or expelled from the country. This changed at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. But it was not until the middle of the 20th century that Swedish citizens were allowed to leave the Lutheran Church. In 2000 we got complete religious freedom, when the State Church system was abandoned.

In Thailand there is a Buddhist movement wanting to make Buddhism the Official State religion. In Serbia they are now introducing strict religious laws in favour of some majority religious groupings. In Belarus it is not allowed to meet in homes for religious services and prayer. In Turkmenistan the regime in power continues the former president Niyasov's repression of religious groups outside the accepted ones with a State-controlled leadership for Muslims and Orthodox. The leaders fear that other minority religions will threaten this conception. In Azerbaijan there is officially religious freedom, but still evangelical Christians and some Muslims groups experience discrimination, blockage of registration of congregations and sometimes the imprisonment of pastors, based on false accusations. The minister of religion says he is proud of the tolerance. But both

he and the ambassadors of Azerbaijan say that they are afraid that different groups will threaten the stability in the country. Again there is fear.

A real and sincere religious practice cannot be forced upon people and it is only in a living contact with other faiths and other ideas that you can make a real decision of your own. It is sad to see that the Christian faith has on many occasions in history been forced upon peoples, especially in times of crusades. This has caused a lot of harm and it has created superficial religious practice and hypocrisy. The same can be said about other religions.

Most religions started as minority religions. Peoples exchanged ideas, developed beliefs, gained experiences and the conceptions changed and continue to change. This is normal and it can be good if we allow it to happen



*Meeting with government officials in Azerbaijan*

in peace, without violence and without oppression and discrimination. It is when people become oppressed and discriminated against that they will isolate themselves and develop extreme ideas which are often opposed to their society, instead of contributing to it. Let religious freedom and exchange of ideas flourish and the world will be a better place of understanding and of peaceful conflict resolutions.

Let the world be a place of freedom. Let's work for the implementation of this in our own countries, through national and international networks and through the international community.

