

**On Religious Liberty,
re-reading *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* in London in 2005**

Baptists began in a time of struggle for religious liberty. It has seldom been out of their minds. They wrote their abiding concern for such matters into the constitution of the Baptist World Alliance.¹ It remains in the forefront of their calling today.

Far from the commonly predicted demise of religious belief in the last century, the issues of religion and freedom have become contemporary global concerns. This has largely come about because of the nature of religious beliefs, the massive movements of population, the incidents of terror linked in the minds of many to religious fanatics, and the resurgence of the relationship of religion and national identity. These and other matters are often the focus of debates in the British Houses of Parliament. Religious Liberty is a much debated topic, touching on local, national and international relations.

This lecture attempts to do two things. First, it expounds and examines what is taken to be a formative early statement of Baptist conviction on these matters. Then, this affirmation will be examined in the context of some contemporary issues. It is obvious that the topic of religious liberty is immense with huge political, philosophical and moral implications. This lecture therefore openly admits to superficiality as it seeks to reflect briefly on the nature of some current issues with a view to contributing to what will be a long running debate among the nations and the religions for such future as may be given to us.

Thomas Helwys

¹ J.D.Hughey Jnr, "Baptists and Religious Freedom", *The Baptist Quarterly*, vol. XVII April 1958, pp 249-55.

The first Baptist known to write on universal religious liberty was Thomas Helwys, squire of Broxtowe, near Nottingham. Helwys was born around 1550. He belonged to John Smyth's congregation of Separatists meeting mainly in Gainsborough who, like others, found their religious life stifled by the then current legislation in England and so they made their way to Holland sometime in 1607/8. Helwys was eventually to return in 1611, the last year in which there were executions in England on the grounds of religious belief. After a painful separation from John Smyth and the others, Helwys came back with a small group, possibly not much more than ten members and these together formed the first Baptist Church on English soil, at Spittlefields, then outside the city walls of London.

Helwys wrote at least four books, the last of which, published 1611/12, is entitled *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*.² Famously, Helwys sent a copy to King James 1 with a personal note written inside the cover.³ This note summarizes Helwys's argument,

Hear, O King, and despise not the counsel of the poor, and let their complaints come before thee. The king is a mortal man and not God, therefore has no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual lords over them. If the king has authority to make spiritual lords and laws, then he is an immortal God and not a mortal man. O King, be not seduced by deceivers to sin against God whom you ought to obey, nor against your poor subjects who ought and will obey you in all things with body, life and goods, or else let their lives be taken from the earth. God save the king.

² There are a very few first edition copies in existence, two at Regent's Park College, Oxford. In 1935 the Baptist Historical Society published a facsimile edition. The most recent edition is published by Mercer University Press in 1998, edited and introduced by Richard Groves. Quotations will be made from this edition. The title quotes 2 Thessalonians 2.7.

³ This edition is in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

It is not known whether King James received and read the book but in 1612 Helwys was arrested and sent to Newgate Prison. He died sometime before the end of 1616.

The Mystery of Iniquity is divided into four books. The style is generally polemical, sometimes sarcastic, and makes for hard reading. It is not to be commended for its literary or overall theological quality.⁴ The first book begins, bluntly, with an attack on the Roman Church, identified as the first Beast of the book of Revelation. Building his case on references largely from the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation, Helwys condemns in particular the “binding of men’s consciences” and the taking of the Word of God from the people. He criticizes the extravagant use of titles for the leaders of these churches, titles which rightly belong to God alone. The Church of England he takes to be the second Beast of Revelation. It also is a compulsive church, insisting on telling priests “what to pray, when to pray, and where to pray, and what to put on when they pray”.⁵ Helwys urges the King to confiscate the buildings and possessions of the Church of England such that it is supported only by the “free liberality of the saints”.

Books Three and Four are respectively attacks on Puritanism and Brownism. Helwys argues that reform of the known church from within is an empty hope. Separatism from that body is necessary. As far as Helwys is concerned, the Puritans had not sufficiently separated themselves from the Second Beast, seeking and accepting as they did ecclesiastical appointments. His congregational understanding of the church is clear. Both Presbyterianism and Episcopalian forms of government overrule consciences by their own laws and decrees.⁶ The attack on Brownism, the Separatists, focused on the writing of John Robinson (c. 1575-1625). Helwys develops his convictions about the church

⁴ James R. Coggins with some justification describes Helwy’s as a superficial thinker and narrow-minded nationalist, *John Smyth’s Congregation; English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation* (Scottsdale; Herald Press 1991) p.150

⁵ p.17

⁶ p.74

of Christ, contrasting the Separatist emphasis on the voluntary covenant with his own understanding of baptism. He criticizes the Separatists for remaining in the Netherlands in comparative safety and cites the Acts, the Epistles and the book of Revelation as evidence of the need to endure persecution for the truth of the Gospel. As far as Helwys is concerned it is not possible to witness to Christ in England from a foreign soil.

Book II

It is in Book II that Helwys states and develops his argument for universal religious liberty. It must have required some courage to present his case so publicly, his address being directly to the king. Helwys believes he can do this because the king's throne is established by justice. He accepts, indeed argues for, the due right of lawful monarchs to reign. God has given power and authority to the monarch which all the king's subjects should acknowledge, respect and obey. The king has the power to make laws and ordinances and see that they are enforced. Indeed God has given to the king all worldly power which extends to the goods and bodies of his servants. Following Paul in Romans 13, Helwys believes the State is divinely ordained. But the king is called to be zealous for the glory of God and, by resisting any friendship with the beast, all monarchs show that they are true lovers of the Lamb.⁷ Certainly the king should not give up his God-given power to the influence of the Beast. Let the king reign, is Helwys's argument.

But, and it is a crucial "but", God has reserved to himself a heavenly kingdom, not of this world. It is a kingdom in which the monarch with all his people is properly subject, for in this kingdom Christ alone is head, "Christ is King alone, only high priest and chief bishop; and there is no king, no primate, metropolitan, archbishop, lord spiritual, but Christ only, nor may be, either in

⁷ p.32

name or power to exercise authority one over another”.⁸ Within this Kingdom Christ alone has power of appointment and Caesar must not attempt to take what belongs to God alone. Should the earthly king seek to do so, then he takes authority to sit not only on the throne God has given him in the nation but also on David’s throne. Helwys points out the distress which would come if every king would take the power, for example as in Spain, to compel all in the nations and dominions to serve God as the king commands, declaring, by the power of the sword, all to be papists and any that resist be seen as evil doers. Such an outcome would be based on the false belief that the monarch, through the state, has rights and power over human consciences. But an earthly sword is ordained only for earthly power. A spiritual sword is needed for a spiritual kingdom and only Christ sits upon David’s throne to order the spiritual kingdom. The monarch must recognize this. “It is spiritual obedience that the Lord requires, and the king’s sword cannot smite the spirits of men. And if our lord the king shall force and compel men to worship and eat the Lord’s Supper against their consciences, so shall he make his poor subjects to worship and eat unworthily, whereby he shall compel them to sin against God, and increase their own judgements”⁹ The crucial matter for Helwys is the sovereign right of Christ the King and the holy nature of the human conscience before God. The king must exercise no cruel tyranny over consciences, nor allow any others to do the same, for religion should be a freely chosen matter, since all will stand before the judgement seat of God. Christ himself did not force human consciences. He did not condemn the Samaritans who refused him, nor did he dismiss the people of Gadara when they pleaded with him to leave. “... no sword of justice (is) at all required or permitted to smite any for refusing Christ”.¹⁰ Indeed, the earthly monarch has a responsibility to see that such a sword should not be used on his earthly subjects. Helwys summarizes this part of his argument thus –

⁸ p.34

⁹ p.37

¹⁰ p.38

“Then let our lord the king in all happiness and prosperity sit in his own princely throne of that mighty kingdom of Great Britain, which God has given to the king and his posterity. And the Lord give the king a most wise heart to rule and judge his people. And the Lord give all his people faithful hearts to love and obey him. And let all those the king’s enemies that would not that he should reign over them be slain before him.

And let our Lord Jesus Christ in power and majesty sit upon David’s throne, the throne of the kingdom of Israel, which his Father has given unto him. And let Christ according to his own wisdom judge his people Israel. And let our (lord) the king be his subject, the which our lord the king yielding himself to be. The king must needs grant that as he is an earthly king he can have no power to rule in this spiritual kingdom of Christ, nor can compel any to be subjects thereof, as a king, while the king is but a subject himself. For there may be but one king in Israel.”¹¹

On such a basis Helwys goes on to question the practice of the king appointing spiritual lords over the house of God, and of their insistence that the ways and words of worship be prescribed and that in the tongue not of the people.¹² Citing what he takes to be the good example of King Henry VIII, who freed the people from the bondage to the first beast, Helwys hoped James will do the same with the excesses of this rising second Beast who keep the people in a cruel bondage which insists that only the bishops have the true interpretation of the Word and that they determine how God is to be worshipped with appointed prayers. Helwys pleads with the king to affirm for the people that “blessed liberty to read and hear the Word of God in their own language” and to pray in their public worship in their own tongue. Anything less represents an assumed power to rule over human consciences in the greatest things between God and man. Let the king be satisfied with the power God has given him and resist any who would

¹¹ p. 39

¹² It was only in 1604 at the Hampton Court conference, such a disappointment to the Puritans, that James declared the doctrine, “no bishop, no king”. The serious matter of excommunication followed for those who criticized or deviated from the Book of Common Prayer.

deny liberty of conscience to his subjects. Neither Christ nor his apostles commanded a way of worship. The king should take any sword of compulsion out of the bishops' hands. If they are to remain in office, let them be tested by application of the Word of God to their lives and doctrine. If the king would search the Scriptures he will see that there is no warrant for the king to elect bishops anyway. Let the king restore that power of Christ to the church to "the election and ordination of bishops and deacons according to the rule of the Holy Ghost".¹³

It is in this context of a plea about false shepherds of the flock of Christ, those who take the king's sword into their own hands, preferring their own kingdom before Christ's, that we come to the most famous quotation. To begin it a little earlier than usual, "But these lord bishops cannot in any wise endure ones that do faithfully seek for reformation, because such are only adversaries to their kingdom. We still pray our lord the king that we may be free from suspect, for any thoughts of provoking evil against them of the Romish religion, in regard to their profession, if they are true and faithful subjects to the king. 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".¹⁴

Helwys presses his argument, especially with regard to any possible force being applied to citizens to believe the Lord Bishops, any more than that any be forced to believe the way the small Baptist groups are reading Scripture. Who shall decide between different readings of Scripture? Helwys' position is that the

¹³ p. 52

¹⁴ p. 53

teaching Christ and his apostles in the New Testament gave is surely the test for bishops and Baptists. That same New Testament includes evidence of persecution of the church by worldly governors, although admittedly these were heathen rulers. Helwys appeals to the Christian king to respond differently. Let Christians work for the conversion of the enemies of Christ and not their destruction. Helwys prays that the king may resist any temptation to take power over the church of Christ. He asks that the king and his sons, to God's glory, may sit upon the throne of Great Britain while the earth endures.¹⁵ But to teach and profess a differing judgement in religion to the state cannot be seditious. The book concludes,

“And may it please our lord the king and all that are in authority in government under the king, with their wise judgement to consider that it will be a strange thing to condemn men for sedition who profess and teach that in all earthly things the king's power is to be submitted unto, and in heavenly or spiritual things, if the king or any in authority under him shall exercise their power against any, they are not to resist, by any way or means although it were in their power, but rather submit to give their lives, as Christ and his disciples did, and yet keep their consciences to God. And they that teach any other doctrine, let them be accursed.”¹⁶

A brief summary

It is crucial to recognize that the core of Helwys' argument is theological. God in Christ is sovereign and has given authority to the earthly monarch. This is one of the ways by which God rules the world. But the monarch has no authority in the spiritual kingdom, that realm of conscience between God and all humankind which is a fundamental God-given freedom. Christ alone rules the Church, a company whose calling it is to seek and do the Lord's will.

¹⁵ p. 61

¹⁶ p. 62

In London in 2000

Close to four hundred years separate us from Helwys. We inhabit a very different political, economic and social world. In his day, the plea for universal religious liberty was courageous indeed. It is something for which Baptists may be properly thankful to God. What follows in this lecture are some reflections in a very particular personal context.

During the opening years of this new millennium I shared the pastoral responsibility of the Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church in London. During these years there occurred the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, USA, in 2001 and later in 2005 the London tube and bus bombings. The war against Iraq was launched, in the face of massive protests marches in London and elsewhere. The security arrangements in the city of London were obviously heightened in these years and issues of religious liberty were constantly in the news, issues of dress and jewellery as well as more significant issues of freedom to practice dissent from legislation. Terrorism, nationality, religion, security and morality were all bundled together. Re-reading Helwys prompted many reflections for the local Baptist church and its pastor.

The ecumenical changes

Initially, the target and tone of much of Helwys' book is embarrassing. The anti-papist assumptions in his writing were nothing unusual for their time but they do not make for helpful reading now. One of the first events of my ministry at Bloomsbury was a service at which the then Archbishop of Westminster, Cormac Murphy O'Connor, came to preach the sermon, at his request. It was virtually ten years to the day after Cardinal Basil Hume had been the servant of the Word in the Baptist chapel. This is hardly to claim that there are no theological differences

between Baptists and Roman Catholics but it is to note the changed atmosphere. There are particular demands that go with being a central church in London in the new millennium, not least in naming the Christlike God, and one of my many causes for gratitude is the ecumenical partnerships between the local West End ministers which spread across a theological horizon from Roman Catholic to independent Evangelical. We knew we needed one another, for Christ's sake.

I am less embarrassed, however, by Helwys's polemic against the leadership of the churches, parading their titles and their dress and their assumed power, as they are appointed by the State. It is obviously hard to resist the temptations of establishment, even for Free Church pastors to seek a place among the powerful. But all this can send out a message which is not always faithful to Christ. Prelates in Palaces, with extraordinary titles, can appear a long way from Bethlehem, Nazareth and Golgotha. Such matters are noticed and can be an embarrassment when it comes to commending the message of Jesus Christ on the streets of London. And then there is the question of who made these appointments anyway. Helwys was on to something.

Interpreting Scripture

Helwys was painfully aware that Christians interpret the Bible differently. This was a feature of the life of the early congregation he shared in Gainsborough and Holland. Any different interpretations were not to be taken lightly because important issues were at stake. What Helwys claimed was that all were under the authority of the Word but that no one should force their interpretation on others, as a matter of conscience. He believed that the task of listening to Scripture was the responsibility of the whole church. Hearing the truth was not a matter of simply listening to the Bishops. They could be wrong, as the local Baptist congregation could be wrong. The task for all was to listen for the Word of Christ in the witness of Scripture.

For Helwys the revelation of God's will is primarily in Jesus Christ as witnessed to in the Holy Scriptures. He held a stronger Christology than many of the Anabaptists with whom he came into contact. This is clear in the confession he wrote, *A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam*.¹⁷ It is the authority of Christ that means that no congregation has authority over another, although the Church is one in Christ. Each congregation chooses persons qualified according to the rules in Christ's Testament to be its officers. Only later, in section 23 of his Declaration of Faith does he directly claim authority of Scripture.¹⁸ Clearly Helwys believed that conscience should be shaped by Scripture under the authority of Christ.

The bold plea for Religious Liberty

Helwys is best known today for his plea for universal religious liberty from the state. It is important to note that, unlike such current pleas this is a strictly theological argument. It is not an appeal to rights.

Helwys' plea was for universal freedom of conscience in matters of religion. Conscience is an elusive term and it is not entirely clear as to how Helwys was using it. He relates conscience to God, not just to matters of belief

¹⁷ "That IESUS CHRIST, the Sonne off GOD the second Person, or subsistence in the Trinity, in the Fulnes off time was manifested in the Flesh, being the seed off David, and off the Isralits, according to the Flesh. Roman. 1.3 and 8.5 the Sonne of Marie the Virgine, made of hir substance, Gal 4.4. By the power off the HOLIE GHOST overshadowing hir, Luk.1.35. and being thus true Man was like vnto us in all thing, sin onely excepted. Hebe 4.15. being on person in two distinct natures, TRVE GOD, and TRVE MAN." "That IESUS CHRIST is Mediator of the New Testament between GOD and Man, 1 Tim 2.5, haveing all power in Heaven and in Earth given vnto him, Mat 28.18. Being the onely KING, Luke 1.33, PREIST, Heb 7.24, and PROPHET, Act 3.22. Off his church, he also being the onely Law-giver, hath in his Testament set down an absolute, and perfect rule off direction, for all persons, at all times, to bee observed; Which no Prince, nor anie whosoever, may add to, or diminish from as they will avoid the fearefull judgments denounced against them that shal so do. Revel.22.18, 19" being sections 8 and 9 of *A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam* (1611) from W.L.Lumpkin, *Baptst Confessions of Faith* (Chicago, The Judson Press 1959) p.119

¹⁸ Helwys is an example of the argument of Philip Thompson's thesis that, with the exception of the Second London Confession (1677) which followed closely the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) Baptist Confessions and catechical pieces began with God and Christ and only later moved to humanity and Scripture. See P. Thompson, "Towards Baptist Ecclesiology in Pneumatological Perspective" (PhD Thesis, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, 1995) pp.42-3

but to lived faith. He seems to imply that there is some space, some relationship, personal but not private, in which the voice of God is heard by the Spirit through Scripture and the human response is made. It is the deepest of relationships between humankind and God. Thus certain actions might be avoided because, however common they might be in the inherited religious context, the believer holds in good conscience that they are counter to the ways and will of God known in Scripture. This might be particularly so with ways of worship. In that sacred relationship between God and each one of us none shall interfere, parliament or people. Before God, only Christ is Lord and God alone has authority over our consciences. It is far from clear that Helwys realized the political implications and consequences of his argument.

Church and State

For example, what should be the relationship of church and state? What responsibilities does each bear and to whom?

As we have seen, Helwys, the Squire of Broxtowe and member of the gentry, was a monarchist in that he clearly supported the right of the king to reign. As far as he was concerned, the king was in power by divine appointment and, as such, was to be obeyed. Monarchy was taken to be a sign and gift of divine providence. Today we might still argue that government is a work of divine providence, one of the ways God rules the world and hopefully sin is kept within bounds. But we certainly do not look on monarchy as Helwys did. The United Kingdom has a constitutional monarchy, with power in the hands of parliament, that is, government by the people's elected representatives, a relative social democracy. This is where political authority lies but what are its limits and present responsibilities, not least towards faith communities?

Baptists have supported arguments for democracy, for a free church in a free state. But what is a free state? Free from what? The control of others states,

perhaps, as well as freedom from any tyrannical leaders? And free for what? And what is the State anyway? Presently, we have arguments within the United Kingdom about nationality and sovereignty, for Welsh and Scottish Assemblies. In Ireland, over the years, the issue has brought forth violence and many deaths, although hopefully we are now moving, through democratic means, to a more peaceful future. Moreover, today we are living through a vast experiment in human relations called Europe. The movements of people have been considerable, raising questions of boundaries, Britishness and the scope of political authority. The European community continues to grow in membership but it brings with it sharp questions, for example, of Turkey's membership, a country more obviously shaped, unlike the rest of Europe, by Islam. The war with Iraq in the minds of many raised questions of the role of the United Nations and the authority of international law in the nation state. So the issues of political order and religion are raised.¹⁹

How does all this look to the Christian Church which claims to be catholic in its membership? The free churches in England have, for the most part, resisted any show of particular national identity, for example with flags and other symbols. Our context in London is one where there remains a national church by law established and a growing number of churches whose membership is to some extent defined by language and nationality. What is the relationship of the Church of Jesus Christ to the nation states which, to a large extent not least economically, are also members of more international bodies? Helwys' world was much simpler than ours in this respect. His theology of church and state involved less complicated matters. We are in need of some urgent thinking on the internationalism of the church in relations to the political structures of our changing days and the changing roles and powers of the nation state with regard to inter-state relations. It is not now the limited question of church and state but religions and political realities such as states. If the monarch was once seen as a

¹⁹ See the lecture by Rowan Williams, "Religion, culture, diversity and tolerance – shaping the new Europe", delivered at the European Policy Centre, Brussels, November 2005. The text can be found at www.archbishopofcanterbury.org.

providential gift of God towards the ordering of the world, could such an argument be used now of the international vision of the United Nations? How else shall we live with the imperial ideologies of powerful nations, an urgent question for the new century? The national interest of any nation is likely to continue to take precedence over international claims.²⁰ This is no unrealistic plea for world government but it is the recognition that our political situation requires some more probing reflection on theology and politics than is presently our Baptist practice. When we speak of a free church in a free state, how is the state to be defined and what is the relationship between the state's freedom to pursue self interest and the responsibility for the common good of all? And how are the state's citizens to relate their faith and citizenship, especially if one is universal and the other more limited?

Terrorism

All this has further added complications. Some of our present concerns are not restricted to the traditions of state interest and war. Terrorism is a phenomenon difficult to define and locate. The much vaunted "war on terrorism" does not relate to states as such. An important shift has taken place. Dealing with al Qaeda is not like dealing with a nation state. The traditional restraints on power are no longer in place and some key players in the peace of the world may not be nation states at all. Against whom is the war on terror declared? How would anyone know it was just and had been won? Al-Qaeda may have the support of some states but it is not formally limited to them. The traditions of "just war" do not work in a situation of terrorism.²¹ So how should we respond? In London and in America, following the 9/11 and 7/7 atrocities, it was

²⁰ As is the case with debates on climate change, to take one pressing example.

²¹ Discussion on these matters is well illustrated in several recent works; Edward LeRoy Long, *Facing Terrorism; responding as Christians* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press 2004), Lee Griffith, *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 2002), Leonardo Boff, *Fundamentalism, Terrorism and the future of humanity* (London, SPCK, 2006), Duncan B. Forrester, *Apocalypse Now? Reflections on Faith in a Time of Terror* (Aldershot, Ashgate 2005) and Michael Northcott, *An Angel directs the Storm, Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire* (London, I.B.Tauris, 2004)

understandable that people should want an immediate and striking reply. That reflects the history of violence that is the tale of humankind. But there were voices asking whether to reply to force with force, seeking vengeance, was the best response. The rhetoric of warfare, allied with calls for patriotism, created a kind of Manichean view of the world where “we” are right and “they” are wrong. This, wrapped in the religious language of Christianity, or Islam, or any other faith or ideology, only creates a context where violence will continue without resolution. But there were other resources in the Christian faith we did not seriously develop before going to war. How should the church respond to evil? The war of terror, which has drawn dangerous identifications between war and some kinds of religion, only indicates the need for other ways of response to be courageously and dissentingly pursued.

To summarize for a moment, Helwys argued for religious liberty for all, be they “heretics, Jews, Turks or whatsoever”, for that is a matter between God and each one of us. For Helwys, Christ has absolute power and authority in the church. This community of faith can never become the plaything of the politicians. Christ’s teaching, for Helwys, is to be found in Scripture and it is on this basis that he criticizes the activities of the Roman and English churches of his day. He sees a relationship between the state and Christ but he does not work this out, seeking only in his context to insist upon that God given space of conscience where Christ alone can reign. Helwys does not address the issue of what authority Christ might have in the governance of the nation. His argument is limited to liberty of conscience before God. This is, of course, a position with political consequences. Helwys would probably not have been imprisoned were it not so. What he argued for sounded dangerously traitorous. He wanted freedom for Turks, Jews, infidels and whatever else people might say is their faith and loyalty to God. He would have had no problem in saying they were wrong in their beliefs, for only Christ is the true revelation of God, but that they were to be free of state control to be wrong was his point. It is a clear and important principle and Helwys is to be honoured for his costly affirmation of it. However, there were and

are several important undiscerned and unresolved issues concerning the relations of faith and politics, church and the world.

Religion as a threat to the State

For example, how shall the state act for the common good when any religion becomes a threat to the state, when some believe that working for the destruction of the state is a work that honours God? Those who created terror in New York and London did so in the name of God. Are they free to practice such religion? One curt answer is to say that what they did was illegal and subject to the law of the State. Thus terrorists, suicide bombers, to take the current example, act illegally. If you ask for the grounding of that law, then the answer in the public square will be an appeal to parliamentary and such trans-national and international laws and conventions as the democratic state recognizes. There is therefore a limit on freedom. Freedom, even in the name of God, is not the same as license.

The whole notion of “freedom” is presently unclear. The theologian Richard Bauckham is not alone in speaking of a crisis of freedom, suggesting that the current emphasis on individual freedom in our society has led to the breakdown of community and family structures, the increasingly isolated lives that many lead, the decay of traditional values, and the competitive acquisitiveness and commercially driven hedonism that have taken their place freedom threatens community and entails rejection of authority.²² This, it is often argued, is the outworking of a view of being human influenced by the Enlightenment convictions about individual autonomy. Again from Bauckham, “whether modernity has in fact delivered the emancipation it saw as its goal, whether it has proved a movement of liberation or a project of domination, whether the freedom it has delivered is a boon or a burden, whether the kind of

²² *God and the Crisis of Freedom; Biblical and contemporary perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2002) p.2.

freedom it envisaged was the authentic goal of human fulfillment or a deformation of human freedom – that such questions are now inescapable constitutes the crisis of modernity”.²³

If religious believers wish to change the ways of the state, or to subvert its present policies, then there are democratic means so to do. Any claim that God told me to bomb these towers, or that this child is demon possessed and in need of exorcism, may be a personal belief, sincerely held, but you cannot claim religious conviction as a justification for what in law is murder and abuse. But if one believer’s act of sacrifice is another believer’s crime, what holds the body politic together? Of course, all this is only to recognize the central issue of governance, power and authority in the community and the limits of personal freedom. Once people appealed to what they believed was the law of God. Today the cry is more likely to be voiced in terms of rights but that language is in crisis in modernity. How can we maximize individual freedom without the human abuse it can clearly bring? It is a question which arises in debates on medical ethics, human sexuality, marriage and the family to name but a few crucial issues. Without shared values it is increasingly difficult to legislate on many issues of conscience. Coping with all this, recognizing the many expressions of self-interest, and holding the community together is part of the very difficult art of government, at least in liberal democracies.²⁴ Helwys recognized Christians had some responsibility for the common life of the State. He held, against the Mennonites and John Smyth that a Christian could act as a magistrate. Here was the decision to be engaged in the larger society.²⁵ But how is this to be done? Are the Church and the State to be kept so separate?

The temptations of Theocracy

²³ p.178

²⁴ One is reminded of William Temple’s aphorism “The art of government in fact is the art of so ordering life that self-interest prompts what justice demands”, *Christianity and Social Order* (London: SPCK 1976) p.65.

²⁵ See the long paragraph 24 in *A Declaration of Faith of English People remaining at Amsterdam in Holland 1611* in W.L.Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Chicago: The Judson Press, 1959) p.122-3

One response is to move beyond universal freedom to the seeking of the establishment of a theocracy. In a theocracy, what are taken to be the laws of God become the laws of the State. Thus, all shall worship on the same day, in the approved manner, because God says so. Fundamentalists of all kinds seek to influence and shape the life of the state's legislation, in the belief that they are serving God.²⁶

There are, I believe, theological reasons why such an approach should be resisted, two in particular. The first is the necessity of modesty laid upon all who speak of God. Are we so sure we know what God wants? Yes, may come the answer, we have all that in God's book. But is that the Bible or Koran, to name but two possible claimants? Both Christianity and Islam however bear witness to the obvious point that all texts need interpretation and these vary, not least among the learned scholars and members of deep spiritual discernment. There are forms of faith in God too confident to be true.²⁷ In a theocracy force of some kind is necessary so that what are taken to be God's laws are kept.

The second response is particularly Christian. It is to say that the fundamental revelation of God is in Jesus Christ to whom the Christian Scriptures bear witness. Jesus is Lord and one aspect of the freedom he brings is the responsibility to seek and do God's will. On what this is trusting godly souls, as matters of conscience, may disagree. How can we in the Church express our common loyalty while recognizing the fact of differing opinions?²⁸

Helwys was concerned especially with how the authority of Christ in the church and the believers' heart and soul, might find free expression. He wanted

²⁶ The aggressive "confessionalism" which is apparent among some Baptists in America has led to the experience of members of the Bloomsbury Church sometimes having to listen to painful stories told by those who no longer feel they can call themselves Baptists. It is an issue not confined to American Baptists.

²⁷ H H Farmer, *The Healing Cross* (London: Nisbet and Co 1938) p. viii

²⁸ See the recent discussion by Sean Winter, *More light and truth? Biblical Interpretation in Covenantal Perspective*, (Whitely Publications 2007).

the freedom to be a Christian as he understood it. This is his, he argues, not by right but by the gift of God in Christ. But how does the authority of Christ relate to the common life? Helwys does not help us much in any discussions of how the church might relate to the State. The story of the church, not least in the present, implies that the church in the name of Christ will always challenge the idolatries of power. I have already suggested that this might have been more vigorously undertaken as the war against Iraq and the so-called war on terror were launched. It is the duty of government to defend the state but Christians must be alert to the power of self-interest this responsibility can call forth. In today's increasingly global world what also are the responsibilities of the state to the whole of humankind? The Christian catholic vision will always sit uneasily with quick calls to patriotism and nationalism which may well amount to no more than the idolatry which is empire.

A Free Church in a Free State. Like all slogans it needs careful attention and recent events in New York and London underline that fact. Unless the church is going to withdraw into apolitical quietism, always the soft conservative option, it will seek in some ways to influence the common good. As a social entity the church is a factor in the body politic. Interestingly, one argument for the continued establishment of the Church of England comes from other faith traditions, namely that in such a relationship of church and state the claims for religious liberty can be safeguarded for all faiths. At a local level, the London Borough of Camden, in which the Bloomsbury Church is set, appointed a Faith Relations Officer through whose work residents of different faiths in Camden were brought together, a secular initiative towards the faith communities. There is good evidence to suggest that at the time of 9/11 and later at the London bombings such creative work in relationships helped the faith communities to stand together in mutual support and the condemnation of evil. There is an urgency about building relationships with people of other faiths that Helwys never knew. This does not negate the crucial call to witness to Christ but it does mean a willingness, in church and state, to listen and learn, to build community where people are free to

practice their faith, be they heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever. In fact, as Rowan Williams argues, “Unless the liberal state is engaged in a continuing dialogue with the religious community, it loses its essential liberalism. It becomes simply dogmatically secular, insisting that religious faith be publicly invisible; or it become chaotically pluralist, with no proper account of its legitimacy except a positivist one (the state is the agency that happens to have the monopoly of force).²⁹

This standing together in mutual affirmation and community sense was vital in the face of some of the media responses to the London bombings. Looking at the way some newspapers strung together words and pictures of terrorist and Moslems sent out the false message that Islam is a religion of terror. People of other faiths were needed to say, against the power of the press, that that was simplistically wrong. However, it is not the first task of the Church to nurture moral consensus, crucial as that may be. The primary task of the Church is to be faithful to Christ in whose service all are free indeed.³⁰

This can sound like a plea for tolerance. But tolerance can produce its own oppressions just as, paradoxically, a democracy can vote for its demise in totalitarianism. The cry for “freedom” today can amount to not much more than propaganda, for much iniquity can be done in the name of freedom. Freedom without morality is toxic.³¹ The pluralism of the present finds its life in the democratic liberal consensus wherein the function of the state is not to determine the religion but to provide a context in which individuals can freely follow their own interests in religion, morality and economics and everything else. Helwys was courageous in his day with his plea for religious liberty. He grounded that plea not in a secular appeal to human rights but Christologically. Because Christ is the only rightful Lord in that relationship between us all and God then all other

²⁹ Rowan Williams, “Religion, Culture, diversity and tolerance”.

³⁰ Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom*, p.88

³¹ See the discussion by Daniel C. Maguire, *A Moral Creed for all Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) pp 146-158

authorities are relativized. His theology lacked what later Baptists would recognize as a missionary spirit, a response which led to other questions of the relationship between peoples of different faiths. But he put down a theologically significant marker for us even if many hard questions remain about how we might live faithfully in commitment to Jesus Christ today. Helwys lived in a much less religiously plural culture than is ours. In his day, in Great Britain, Christianity was the active dominant faith, albeit being expressed in various painfully competitive forms. Today, he remains helpful in our increasingly pluralistic society, shaped not the least by that elusive autonomous individual of the Enlightenment who abides, apparently, as the sole source of authority on matters of faith and morals whose freedom the government must protect against any encroaching influence of religion. Helwys does not offer us a theory of rights, struggling to find a sure foundation to safeguard against fanaticism and terror. He confessed his faith, believing that one sure foundation is laid, namely Jesus Christ the Lord who said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."³² That was Helwys' conviction and, in his growing arminianism, he held that we are free to believe it or not. Such freedom is not a matter of right so much as the gift of the creator saviour God, the source of all freedom, the one whom even monarchs and parliaments should honour and praise. To declare this today is to be a dissenter indeed, one who argues in the name of God for the religious liberty of all.

³² John 7.32