

Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

Baptists and Religious Freedom

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Hughey, J.D.
Publisher	Baptist Historical Society
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-02 04:12:09
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/154389

Baptists and Religious Freedom

RELIGIOUS liberty is a subject of perennial interest among Baptists. The Constitution of the Baptist World Alliance states that one of the primary purposes of this organization is "the safeguarding and maintenance of full religious liberty everywhere, not only for our own constituent churches, but also for all other religious faiths,"¹ and every Baptist World Congress issues a manifesto on religious freedom. This may be regarded as one of the fundamental principles of Baptists, one on which they all agree; and in this area Baptists have made a significant contribution. Their interest in religious freedom is related to their emphasis on the personal and voluntary character of true religion.

Of course Baptists do not stand alone as champions of religious liberty. Protestantism, though originally intolerant, is now on the side of religious freedom, or at least of toleration, and so are individuals of many religions and of no religion. No religious communion, however, has a clearer record on this subject than do Baptists.

I

Baptists, along with those of other faiths, have suffered for freedom. Their endurance of fines, imprisonment, and exile has directed attention to its lack and contributed to its achievement. Many have not hesitated to expose themselves to danger when this seemed right.

This was true of Thomas Helwys, the English Baptist pioneer of the early seventeenth century. After he and other refugees in Holland had accepted believer's baptism, he decided that an obligation rested upon him, in spite of danger, to propagate his faith in his own land, and he led a group of Baptists back to England. He took with him for sale in England a book he had written entitled *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, the first appeal published in English for full religious liberty for all. Very daringly the author made his demand:

Our Lord the King is but an earthly King, and he hath no authority as a King but in earthly causes, and if the King's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all humane laws made by the King, our lord the King can require no more; for men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King 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.²

Helwys was still bolder in the dedication to King James I which he wrote with his own hand :

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, and therefore hath 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 so against God, whom thou oughtest to obey, nor against thy poor subjects who ought and will obey thee in all things with body, life and goods, or else let their lives be taken from the earth.

This was too much for the government of James I, and Helwys was put in prison, where he soon died. His appeal for religious liberty seemed to be fruitless, but it was the beginning of a struggle which would eventually be crowned with success.

The persistence of Baptists in worshipping God according to the dictates of their consciences, though this brings punishment, is seen in the record of the Broadmead Church of Bristol, England, for 1670 :

Because we did not know which way they would begin upon us, we shut our public meeting-house door when we understood they were coming. Then they (the informers) fetched constables, and broke open the door, came in, and took our names, for which some of us were brought before the magistrates and convicted. Then, against the next Lord's day, we broke a wall, up on high, for a window, and put the speaker in the next house to stand and preach, whereby we heard him as well as if in the room with us. The bishop's informers come in again, take our names, for which we were again brought before the mayor, and convicted. So they did the third Lord's day. And the fourth Lord's day, the mayor himself, with the officers and some aldermen, came upon us, and turned us out; but seeing they could not make us refrain our meeting, they . . . nailed up our doors, and put locks upon them; so they kept us out by force and power, that we were fain to meet in the lanes and highways for several months.³

Such persistence characterized the early Baptists of colonial America, continental Europe, and other areas. It is also characteristic of present-day Baptists in lands where full freedom is lacking. In Spain Protestants frequently face temptations to renounce their faith or surrender their right to worship, but the temptations are resisted, and slowly but surely the battle for religious freedom is being won. In 1954 twenty-three Baptists of the town of Játiva were fined for taking part in an unauthorized baptismal service in a river. (There was no baptistry in their little chapel.) The majority paid their fines, but five young people went to prison, protesting that they would not pay an unjust fine. The whole town heard of the Protestants who had been put in prison, and public opinion was almost wholly on their side. The church began to have better

attendance than it had ever had before, and many new members were received. The authorities in Játiva will probably not be so imprudent as to imprison other people for religious reasons. Thus does religious fidelity contribute to freedom.

II

Another contribution of Baptists to religious liberty has been in the clarification of its meaning. This is needed, for there is often haziness as to what is involved. Baptists are among those of many communions, and of none, who have had something to say on this subject.

They have always insisted on freedom for all religions, in contrast with those who advocate freedom for "the true religion" only. They have demanded freedom for themselves, but not just for themselves. We have seen that Thomas Helwys asked for freedom for "heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever." In 1947 the Baptist World Alliance, in its manifesto on religious liberty, declared: "God, in his infinite wisdom, having created all men free, instilling in them qualities of independent judgment, calls upon us today, as Christian people, to maintain this God-given freedom not only for ourselves, but for all men everywhere."⁴

Baptists have distinguished between freedom and toleration. The latter implies that the State regards one religion as better than others but permits the inferior religions to exist. In the Baptist World Congress of 1923, E. Y. Mullins stated the case clearly:

Religious liberty excludes the principle of toleration in religion. To put the power and prestige of the State behind one form of religion and merely tolerate others is not religious liberty. It is religious coercion. . . . Equal rights to all and special privileges to none is the true ideal.⁵

The elements in religious liberty were enumerated in the 1947 Baptist World Alliance manifesto on the subject:

Holding the principles of freedom dear, we therefore seek for all people everywhere, and in particular all minority groups, the following freedoms:

Freedom to determine their own faith and creed;
Freedom of public and private worship, preaching and teaching;
Freedom from any opposition by the State to religious ceremonies and forms of worship;

Freedom to determine the nature of their own ecclesiastical government and the qualifications of their ministers and members, including the right of the individual to join the Church of his own choice, and the right to associate for corporate Christian action;

Freedom to control the education of their ministers, to give religious instruction to their youth, and to provide for the adequate development of their own religious life;

Freedom of Christian service, relief work, and missionary activity, both at home and abroad; and

Freedom to own and use such facilities and properties as will make possible the accomplishment of these ends.⁶

Religious liberty may be defined briefly as the right of individuals and groups to hold, publicize, and propagate their religious beliefs and practices and to conduct their religious affairs without external restraint or limitation, and with equality of civil rights, so long as they do not interfere with the rights or liberties of other people.⁷

III

Note next that Baptists have connected separation of Church and State with freedom. Such separation, of course, does not automatically secure religious liberty; it may even bring persecution, as it did in the Soviet Union. From the standpoint of government and religion, however, separation, with friendship and co-operation, is desirable. E. Y. Mullins affirmed "a free Church in a free State" as the religio-civic axiom.⁸

The statements from Thomas Helwys quoted earlier make clear that he regarded government as incapable of ruling in the realm of the spirit, since the immortal God and not mortal man has authority to make laws for the souls of men. Roger Williams was in essential agreement on this point, and in the colony of Rhode Island which he founded there was complete separation of Church and State. Other factors helped to establish this as the American pattern, but the conviction of Baptists should not be overlooked. Baptists of all lands have shared the conviction, though they have not always agreed as to the extent of the separation. Scandinavian Baptists, for example, are quite willing to accept financial aid for their schools, whereas most American Baptists would hesitate about doing so. National traditions as well as religious principles are influential in this realm.

On the Christian's attitude towards the State and the relation of Churches to it, most Baptists would doubtless agree with W. O. Carver :

In relation to the State, the Church (its members and the churches) should recognize the State as a necessary and divinely sanctioned institution for public order and welfare. We believe in the separate functions and the absolute separation and independence each from the other, of the Church and the State as institutions. In civil matters the State has a sphere of proper authority which the individual and the Church should respect and honour. In the realm of religion the individual and the Church must claim freedom from interference by the State. The State must neither control nor support the Church; nor hinder its free functioning in the realm of the spiritual life and religious relations; the Church must give ethical and moral support to the State, contributing to good citizenship but not seeking or accepting control over the State. The churches, individually and in proper combined expression, by challenge and in judgment, should serve as ethical conscience for the common life of society, including the State.⁹

IV

Baptists have also helped to clarify the reasons for religious freedom. Of course they have often championed religious liberty without knowing exactly why, and when they have attempted its logical defence, they have frequently borrowed the arguments used by philosophers, and by theologians of other communions.

Baptists, however, do have a distinctive emphasis in this area. Their principles call for freedom—the personal and voluntary character of religion, the competency of the individual soul under God, individual freedom to interpret the truth of God, church government by the congregation. As Thomas Helwys insisted, God alone is sovereign in the realm of the spirit. E. Y. Mullins said that it is axiomatic that, “to be responsible, man must be free.”¹⁰

From the standpoint of the individual, religious freedom is important, for each person reaches his highest stature as he uses his mind, heart, and will to enter into relationship with God. From the standpoint of churches, it is important, for these grow in spiritual power as they receive the voluntary support of religiously devoted men and women. From the standpoint of the community and nation, it is important, for freedom in religion promotes and upholds all freedoms and stimulates the growth of inquiring and creative minds. From the standpoint of Christianity it is important, for ours is a personal and voluntary religion whose disciples are won by preaching, teaching, persuasion, and kindness.¹¹

The 1939 Baptist World Alliance manifesto on religious freedom contained the following significant statements :

Worthy religion rests on the conviction that the individual soul is competent to deal directly with God, and has the right and the need of this direct dealing. To deny any soul the full exercise of this privilege is to deprive the individual of his inherent and most sacred right, and to violate his dignity and worth as a human being. Every form of coercive restraint or constraint of a man in his converse with God is both a sin against the individual and a hindrance to human welfare. . . .

Voluntariness in personal and corporate worship, institution and service is essential to vital religion and to spiritual development of society.¹²

V

Baptists have not only thought about religious liberty; they have taken practical measures for its achievement. Sometimes they have acted alone, and sometimes in concert with other friends of freedom. Only two illustrations of Baptist action for freedom will be cited.

In 1767 the Warren Association, centred in Rhode Island, was organized, largely for the purpose of co-operation in securing religious freedom. Soon Isaac Backus became the agent of the Association “to give aid to persons who might be oppressed and harrassed

for refusing to pay taxes to support the ministers and work of the Congregationalists." In carrying out his commission he travelled from place to place, wrote much, and several times appealed to the Massachusetts General Assembly. When the Continental Congress was called on the eve of the Revolutionary War to consider matters of interest to all the colonies, Backus led a Baptist delegation to appeal for religious liberty, including disestablishment in Massachusetts. They presented their cause in a conference of delegates from Massachusetts and two other colonies, but without apparent success. One man insinuated that the complaints came from fanatical rather than regular Baptists, and another warned that they might as well expect a change in the solar system as to expect Massachusetts to give up her establishment. Separation of Church and State, however, did take place in 1833. Of course, Baptists do not take credit for it, but their efforts doubtless contributed something to the final result.

The former General Secretary and later President of the Baptist World Alliance, J. H. Rushbrooke, was a tireless champion of religious liberty. He used petitions, protests, personal interviews with government officials, and other means in behalf of oppressed minorities. His intervention in favour of Rumanian Baptists was especially noteworthy. After the First World War, people in the new Rumanian territories (where Baptists were fairly numerous) were suspected of disloyalty. The Baptist World Alliance pleaded their cause, and when this did not relieve the situation Dr. Rushbrooke organized a campaign which resulted in protests to the Rumanian Government from many parts of the world. He had interviews with the Prime Minister and the King. Some relief came when Baptists were recognized as a lawful confession, but repression, and further protests followed. The outcome of the struggle was still not completely clear when the Second World War began.

It is often difficult to know what measures to make for religious freedom. The strategy for one country may not be right for another. Sometimes what is attempted seems to do more harm than good. It is obvious, however, that in the past something needed to be done to achieve religious freedom and that still today in some areas the battle must go on. As a matter of fact, constant vigilance is necessary everywhere, for the battle for religious liberty is never won once for all. Baptists are glad to join with others in vigilance, and also in action when that is necessary.

J. D. HUGHEY, JR.

NOTES

¹ Baptist World Alliance, *Golden Jubilee Congress, London, 16th-22nd July, 1955*, ed. Arnold T. Ohrn (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1955), p. 384.

² Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mistery of Iniquity* (1612). Facsimile by The Kingsgate Press, London, 1935, p. 69. Spelling modernized.

³ Quoted in H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists* (London: The Kingsgate Press, 1946), pp. 130f.

⁴ Baptist World Alliance, *Seventh Baptist World Congress, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 29-August 3, 1947*, ed. W. O. Lewis (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1947), p. 118.

⁵ Baptist World Alliance, *Third Baptist World Congress, July 21-27, 1923*, ed. W. T. Whitley (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1923), p. 68.

⁶ *Seventh Baptist World Congress*, p. 120.

⁷ Cf. J. D. Hughey, Jr., "The Meaning of Religious Liberty," *The Quarterly Review*, April-June, 1957, pp. 55-61.

⁸ E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908), p. 74.

⁹ R. Newton Flew (ed.), *The Nature of the Church* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1952), pp. 294f.

¹⁰ Mullins, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

¹¹ The Author developed the above points in a commencement address at Union University, Jackson, Tennessee, in June, 1957.

¹² Quoted in Henry Cook, *What Baptists Stand For* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, 1953), p. 220.

¹³ Joseph Martin Dawson, *Baptists and the American Republic* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1956), pp. 52f.