

Religious Liberty and Peace
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A teacher in an urban school with a religiously diverse student population asked the kids to bring something to class related to each family's faith tradition. One by one, the students came before the class for a show-and-tell:

The first child said, "I am Catholic and this is my rosary."

The second child said, "I am Jewish and this is my Star of David."

The third child said, "I am Muslim and this is my prayer rug."

The fourth child said, "I am Baptist and this is my casserole dish."

[The English word "casserole" might not be familiar to all of you; maybe you'll get the humor if I paraphrased this way: "The final child said, 'I am a Baptist, this is my dinner plate. When do we eat?'"]

It's a funny story. But maybe more significant than it first appears, since every war is ultimately a war over bread. The fact that Baptists are known for eating together is a hopeful sign—and maybe instructive, in regards to the implications of our passion for religious liberty.

My assignment is to comment on the intersection between the historic Baptist championing of religious liberty—sometimes called "soul freedom" or "soul competency"—together with the kinds of concerns that occupy the Peace Commission of the BWA Freedom and Justice Division, of which I am a grateful member.

Let me begin by quoting a statement by our esteemed BWA general secretary, Dr. Neville Callam, in comments about this special 400th anniversary of Thomas Helwys' historic defense of religious liberty. Dr. Callam wrote:

Contrary to what some authors have said, Helwys was not the first person to issue a call for freedom of conscience to be respected by all. Therefore, we need not make exaggerated claims in order to show our appreciation of Helwys' outstanding contribution in the cause of religious liberty. What we may need to do, instead, is to ask ourselves if we have always maintained respect for the principle of religious liberty that Helwys promoted.¹

That quote reminds me of another, from Thomas Jefferson, considered one of my country's founders—who was accused of being an atheist by his political opponents because of his irregular theology. In one of the last letters of his life, Jefferson wrote:

The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God."²

My purpose in these few minutes is not to assess the historical claims of who deserves more credit for our modern notion of religious liberty. Was it early Baptists like Helwys or Richard Overton? Or is more credit due to later Enlightenment philosophers like John Locke?

In addition, I'm not so interested in the question of who does or does not have religious liberty, and if you don't have it, how do you get it? The question I have is do we have the soul freedom to practice our liberty?

I lift up Jefferson's quote simply because his image of the mass of humanity "being born with saddles on their backs" is so graphic—and is truer now and ever. Every modern indicator reveals that the world's disparity is escalating to unprecedented levels. Even in my own country. And I wonder if our congregations possess enough soul freedom to stand up and name this as an abomination, as the material evidence of spiritual wickedness, as an assault on human dignity but also on the integrity of God's name! Our problem is not atheism. Our problem is idolatry. There is a god afoot in the land who encourages us to say, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth."³

Even the briefest survey of religious liberty and peacemaking history would require a mention of Roger Williams, among the early dissenting Christian immigrants to Britain's colonies in the "new world." It didn't take long for Puritan religious establishment in the Massachusetts Bay Colony to censor and finally expel Williams in 1635, who fled to the wilderness of what is now the state of Rhode Island to found the first Baptist church in the American hemisphere. Religious liberty was his well-known passion. But of the four charges brought against him, the most damning was his claim "that we have not our land by patent from the king, but that the natives are the true owners of it, and that we ought to repent of such a receiving of it by patent."⁴

¹ BWA internet posting, 2 January 2012

² Quoted in Jon Meacham, *God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*, p. 7

³ Deuteronomy 8:17, mocking the ancient Egyptian empire

⁴ *The American Baptist* magazine, September 1986, p. 18

Notice that some real estate transactions have spiritual implications!

What is little known about Williams, even among Baptists, is his commitment to living with Native Americans, especially the Narragansets, and his devotion to learning their language and religious worldview. On numerous occasions he successfully mediated conflicts between Native Americans and the new European immigrant communities. He wrote blistering commentary on the settlers forced baptism of indigenous peoples, “sometimes by wiles and subtle devices, sometimes by force compelling them to submit to that which they understood not.”⁵

Notice that not all forms of religious marketing deserve to be called Christian evangelism!

What we most often fail to note in our celebrations of the legacy of religious liberty pioneers is that some of these very advocates were themselves the least willing to grant liberty to others. William Bradford, governor of the early Plymouth Colony, wrote of his Pilgrim community’s battle with the Pequot Indians at Mystic River, beginning with the torching of the Pequot village:

It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof; but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and [we] gave the praise thereof to God.⁶

Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy.

You would think that anyone promoting religious liberty to a group of Baptists would be a remarkably easy sell. This stuff is in our DNA, is it not?! But remember—it wasn’t that many years ago when the pastor of what was then the largest Baptist church in the U.S. publicly denounced the separation of church and state as “the figment of some infidel’s imagination.”⁷ And also remember: It was the ruthless political philosopher Machiavelli who wrote in his *Discourses* that the Roman Empire “turned to religion as the instrument necessary above all others for the maintenance of a civilized state.”⁸ It is no coincidence that the Gospel writers chose words like “Lord,” “Savior,” “Son of God” and “Prince of Peace” to describe Jesus. These exact same terms were also used of the great Caesar Augustus, ruler of the Roman Empire. At the time, no one needed to point this out. *Pax Christi*, the “peace of Rome,” was described this way by a first century historian: “They rob, butcher, plunder . . . and where they make a desolation, they call it ‘peace.’”⁹

The question we must ask ourselves is this: Does the religious liberty we espouse lead to *Pax Romana*? *Maybe to Pax Americana*? *Or to Pax Christi*?

I have to confess that what concerns me the most is not the explicit restrictions on religious liberty in numerous dictatorial regimes around the world. What concerns me most is the capacity of governments—particularly in the Western world—to bribe religious communities into turning their focus away from warmongering policies. It was the Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels who warned: “Churchmen dabbling in politics should take note that their only task is to prepare for the world hereafter.”¹⁰ You’ll be interested to learn that the Official Report of the Fifth Baptist World Congress meeting in Berlin in 1934 noted: “It is reported that Chancellor Adolf Hitler gives to the temperance movement the prestige of his personal example. . . .”¹¹ A German Baptist delegate spoke out, saying that vigorous races overcoming weaker ones by force is an expression of natural law, and that “we must face the facts.”¹²

The state’s more common form of repressing soul liberty is more subtle and more perceptively described as in 2 Timothy, of those “holding the form of religion but denying the power thereof.”¹³ In my country, only two classes of citizens are granted a special tax break related to housing costs. Members of the military, and ordained clergy.

Is this the kind of religious liberty we want?

One of the most egregious examples of state bribery of religious freedom comes from 1962. A group of 200 business executives and university presidents in the U.S. formed what was called the Committee for Economic Development. The report they issued from their deliberations is titled “An Adaptive Program for Agriculture.” One of the recommendations from that report is this chilling statement: “Where there are religious obstacles to modern economic progress, the religion may have to be taken less seriously or its character altered.”¹⁴ Again, we must ask ourselves: Is the religious liberty which we promote so easily adaptable to the demands of modern economic progress? Is this what “freedom” looks like?

I wish we could spend several days together telling stories about the struggle for religious freedom around the

⁵ Paula Womack, “Made of One Blood: The Story of Roger Williams and Native Americans,” *Baptist Peacemaker*, Winter 1991–Spring 1992, pp. 12-13

⁶ Quoted in Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A story of courage, community, and war*, p. 7

⁷ Dr. W.A. Criswell, then-pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, in a 1984 television interview. Quoted in a book review by Al Sanders of Paul Simmons’ *Freedom of Conscience: A Baptist/Humanist Dialogue*, printed in “Report from the Capital,” 12 June 2000, p. 4

⁸ Quoted in Meacham, p. 25

⁹ Caledonian chieftain Calgacus, in Publius Tacitus, *Agricola*, chapter 30, quoted in Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, p. 15

¹⁰ Quoted in William Barclay, *Barclay on Peace*, p. 18

¹¹ Quoted in William Loyd Allen, “How Baptists Assessed Hitler,” *Christian Century*, September 1-8, 1982

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ 2 Timothy 3:5

¹⁴ Quoted in *PeaceWork*, Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, September/October 1987, p. 12

world. One of extraordinary reports coming out of the Arab Spring movement was a political reporter's photo and written account of Egyptian Christian youth surrounding and protecting Muslim youth during their prayers in Tahrir Square in Cairo. They were doing so because pro-government forces would use the Muslim students' prayer time as the occasion to attack them. So the Christian students formed a human blockade to protect their Muslim friends.

This past fall I wrote about the work of Rev. Rusudan Gotsiridze, a Baptist pastor in the Republic of Georgia in central Europe. A national figure in the human rights advocacy in her country, Rusudan played a pivotal role in her country's expanded protection of religious minorities. Last July the Georgian parliament passed an amendment to its Civil Code giving legal recognition to five non-Orthodox groups, including Baptists. Not satisfied with her own freedom, Rusudan initiated a meeting with leaders of the newly-recognized bodies and convinced them to remove all limiting language, effectively extending legal status to all faith communities.¹⁵

Without a doubt the people who have most influenced me over the past 25 years are our Baptist friends in Cuba. I can still vividly recall my first encounter with a Cuban Baptist pastor, who could quote from memory long passages from the writings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I had no idea that Dr. King was known there. Before long, I came to realize I had no idea of just about anything related to Cuba, primarily because of the long-standing U.S. embargo. It is certainly true that in the early decades after the Cuban Revolution, religious liberty was severely restricted and penalized. But the mid-'80s brought a slow thaw in church-state relations. To tell the story of that developing conversation would take too long to tell here. Suffice it to say, I believe the global church needs to learn from our Cuba friends—and other Christians in similarly restrictive lands. We in the West especially need these lessons, from communities of faith who have had to learn to live without being privileged by the state. Many of our Cuban friends have come to know the power of the Gospel in a profound new way, precisely because of the marginalized condition in which they found themselves.

"In the language of the Bible," Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "freedom is not something you have for yourself but something you have for others."¹⁶ At its deepest level, freedom is not something someone gives you. Freedom is what you assume. Then, when someone comes to take it away, the amount of resistance you offer is the degree to which you are free.¹⁷

¹⁵ "Listen to the Daisies: A profile of Georgian Baptist Bishop Rusudan Gotsiridze," *Folio* (Winter 2012, p. 5), newsletter of Baptist Women in Ministry

¹⁶ *Creation and Fall/Temptation*, 1959, p. 37

¹⁷ Paraphrase of Utah Phillips (15 May 1935–23 May 2008), U.S. labor organizer, folk singer, poet and Christian pacifist, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utah_Phillips