

THOMAS HELWYS – UNLIKELY PROPHET OF UNIVERSAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**Tony Peck****General Secretary, European Baptist Federation****INTRODUCTION**

We do not know much about the life of Thomas Helwys. Neither the date of his birth, possibly in the 1570s, or that of his death, probably in Newgate prison around 1615, are certain. We know that he was born and lived as an English gentleman in Nottinghamshire and trained as a lawyer. But there are periods of his life about which we know nothing. But two factors have assured Helwys's place in the history of Baptists around the world, and in the history of religious toleration and religious freedom. The first is that Helwys together with John Smith were leaders of the earliest Baptist Church begun in exile in Amsterdam in 1609, and Helwys went on to found the first Baptist church in England, in Spitalfields in London, exactly 400 years ago in 1612. So Helwys is the original Baptist pioneer.

And the second factor is that in the middle of a rather polemical book attacking nearly every other religious group in England at that time Helwys made what is usually considered to be the first plea for universal religious freedom in the English language, and since then religious freedom for all, not just themselves, has been a core conviction of Baptists in every part of the world. It is this second aspect on which I want to mainly focus in this paper.

I will say something about the religious and political background of the turbulent times in which Helwys lived; then focus on his book *A Short Declaration of the The Mystery of Iniquity* and especially its plea for religious freedom. Then I want to inquire as to what possible influences came to bear on Helwys to formulate such a radical idea in the England of his time. I will especially concentrate on his interaction with Anabaptism from his contact with Dutch Mennonites when he was part of John Smyth's church in Amsterdam. Finally I will ask about Helwys' legacy, both immediately in the later 17th century, and also for us in the 21st century.

But first we will see a video which I hope might help to bring Helwys to life a little. It was made for the British Baptist Assembly three years ago.

Video

In June 2011, the Archbishop of Canterbury's Annual Lambeth Inter Faith Lecture was delivered by Malcolm Evans, Professor of International Law at the University of

Bristol. The lecture was entitled, 'Advancing Freedom of Religion or Belief: Agendas for Change'. Professor Evans happens to be a Baptist, and has become a widely respected expert in the interaction of law and human rights, and specifically European law and Religious Freedom.¹ This is part of the conclusion of his lecture:

What should Christians – and indeed those of other faiths and none – do to further the freedom of religion or belief? As people of faith it is up to us to champion the cause of others rather than ourselves. And we must do this based on a better understanding of what the religion of belief entails, including what practical steps we should take. As a Christian myself, I suggest that when Christ commanded us to love our neighbour as ourselves, he meant us to do exactly that..... along with all people of goodwill. For if religious believers will not stand up for the right of other believers, irrespective of their faith, why in heaven's name should anyone else?²

I would suggest that in his plea for Christians not to be partisan in their concern for religious freedom, but to be active campaigners for religious freedom for all, Professor Evans is the latest to pick up the challenge thrown down by the first English Baptists leader Thomas Helwys 400 years ago. Helwys lived in a different age and very different world but his words addressed to the all-powerful English King James have the same passion and fire of conviction:

For our Lord the King is but an earthly king, and he has no authority as a king in earthly causes. And if the king's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws, 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 judge between God and men. Let them be heretics, Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.³

This is widely considered to be the first plea for universal religious freedom in the English language.⁴ It comes in Helwys book 'A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity' which is not primarily about religious freedom, but about identifying the errors of the State Church, The Church of England, and other churches. So Helwys, with an uncompromising polemic, identifies the first, second third and fourth beasts of the Book of Revelation as the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, the Puritans and the Separatists (out of which he had come). It is not a book famed for its ecumenical sensitivity, or indeed its literary grace. It was also written in a somewhat feverish state of apocalyptic expectation. In his own opening summary of the book, Helwys' describes it as *the Declaration with proof that these are the days of greatest tribulation spoken of by Christ (Matthew 24) wherein the abomination of desolation is set in the holy place*.⁵ Helwys saw certain religious

¹ Malcolm D Evans, *Religious Liberty and International Law in Europe*, Cambridge Univ Press, 1997

² Annual Lambeth Inter Faith Lecture delivered on 8 June 2011, <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/cgi-bin/parser.pl> Accessed on 13.6.11

³ Richard Groves (Ed), *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity, Thomas Helwys (ca. 1550-ca 1612)*, (Classics of Religious Liberty 1, Macon GA, Mercer University Press, 1998) p.53

⁴ Most recently by John Coffey, *From Helwys to Leland: Baptists and Religious Toleration in England and America, 1612-1791*, in Ed. Bebbington, *The Gospel in the World*, Paternoster 2002, p15

⁵ *A Short Declaration*, *op.cit.* p4

events around him that he thought were leading to an imminent apocalypse.⁶ His response, though, is to engage with the powers of England rather than take the other option of withdrawing and waiting for the End. In this polemical and apocalyptic context his plea for universal religious freedom is perhaps all the more remarkable.

The early 20th century British Baptist Scholar, Henry Wheeler Robinson, comments in this way in his Introduction to the facsimile edition of Helwys' book, published in 1935:

The strong terms in which Helwys denounces those who differ from him, even on points that that may seem to most men (*sic*) today immaterial, and the rather appalling use of Scripture which men (*sic*) then made to characterise the position of their opponents, must not be allowed to obscure from us the fact that the principle of unlimited liberty of religion is here unmistakably asserted. Helwys clearly was ready to give the liberty for which he asked to all these opponents, even the Roman Catholics – a fact which shows us how much ahead of his times he was. He knows it is his duty to convince these opponents of their errors, their deadly errors, but the task must be achieved by reason and prayer, and not by physical force.⁷

Unlike Professor Evans, Helwys would certainly not have been allowed to deliver a lecture based on such thoughts at Lambeth Place, the home of the Archbishop of Canterbury, leader of the English State Church! In fact Helwys addressed one edition of his book to King James with a bold, some would say foolhardy, preface to 'despise not the counsel of the poor' and a plea to the King not to take the place of God in determining the way the English people would worship. We do not know whether King James read it, though we could probably imagine his reaction if he did, but as a result Helwys was put in prison and probably died there around 1615/16.

But the words from his book about religious freedom for all, have continued to justify the judgement of many, like the USA Baptist historian H Leon McBeth:

For (almost) four centuries Baptists have insisted upon complete religious liberty not only for themselves but also for others. In no other area has Baptists witness proved clearer or more consistent than in their struggle for the right of persons to answer to God and to government for religious beliefs and behaviour'.⁸

And so Thomas Helwys holds an honoured place among us. My study of theology for ministry took place at Regent's Park College, Oxford, where the name of Helwys was carved in stone outside the dining hall that also bears his name. In the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague where my office is, there is a building known as the Helwys Pavilion, and also there is based the Thomas Helwys Centre for the study of Religious Freedom. A USA Christian publisher which has

⁶ See Joe Early, The Apocalyptic Nature of Thomas Helwys' Writings in *American Baptist Quarterly* Volume XXVIII, Winter 2009, pp.456-463

⁷ H Wheeler Robinson, *Introduction to Helwys, The Mystery of Iniquity*, Facsimile Edition, London, Kingsgate Press, 1935, p.xiv

⁸ H. L McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Witness* Nashville, TN: Broadman Press 1987, p.252

literary freedom as its chief value has taken the name of Helwys, alongside that of his mentor and leader of the first Baptist church in Amsterdam, John Smyth.

In this paper I too want to celebrate Helwys as the source of our continuing commitment to religious freedom for all. At the same time I want to suggest that in many ways in background and temperament he was an unlikely advocate for this. But in spite of that he achieved a unique synthesis of influences and ideas in his views on church and state. I am sure that some of the consequence of what Helwys wrote are ones which he was not able to work out or foresee. In all this it may be that we discover that the situation is not quite as 'clear and consistent' as that quote from Leon McBeth would seem to suggest!

THE POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

Thomas Helwys was born in to the age of the English Queen Elizabeth who had achieved the final settlement of the Church of England as the State Church established by law, and which allowed for no other lawful religion. During her reign came the growth of Puritanism, which as its name implies ought to 'purify' the State Church by recalling it to what the Puritans saw as the authentic biblical faith. They wanted limits set on the power of the bishops and a greater place given to preaching. The more radical of the Puritans become so disillusioned with the Church of England that they separated from it completely to form their own congregations, on the basis of a covenant. These Separatists, as they were called, included among their number John Smyth, who had been trained as an Anglican clergyman, and Thomas Helwys, then a lawyer and a member of the English gentry, who joined Smyth's Separatist congregation in Lincolnshire in east England.

When King James VI of Scotland succeeded Elizabeth as King James I of England as well there were high hopes among the Separatists that James, coming from Presybyterian Scotland might allow some kind of religious toleration in England. These high hopes were dashed at the Hampton Court Conference of 1603 in which, although James conceded some moderate puritan demands, he re-affirmed conformity with the Church of England as the only religious option. Law required the attendance of the whole population at the Anglican parish church. It is important to note that religious freedom, (or the lack of it) was inextricably linked with political loyalty, following the doctrine of *cuius regio eius religio* (the religion of the state is that of its ruler), that was common in Europe at that time.

Persecution against Separatists increased and this resulted in the Separatist congregation led by John Smyth and including Thomas Helwys escaping to Amsterdam in around 1608. Amsterdam was then a free city practising religious toleration, and it had already received a number of separatist-type groups. And it was here that the Separatist congregation led by John Smyth adopted what we would see now as a Baptist way of being the church.

As is well known, Helwys and Smyth had serious theological disagreements and agreed to separate. Smyth's church applied to join the Mennonites and Helwys

returned to England to start the first Baptist church on English soil, at Spitalfields in London in 1612.

HELWYS PLEA FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Helwys' plea for religious freedom is truly remarkable because nobody was really discussing it at that time in England. It is important to see that someone putting this forward in that context would not only be guilty of spreading dangerous religious ideas, but would also be seen as threatening the security of the state, which was understood to depend on religious uniformity.

Thirty years later in the 1640s the situation was very different. England for the only time in its recorded history rid itself of its monarchy and experienced a 'commonwealth' republic led by Oliver Cromwell where the Puritans were in control and Presbyterianism was favoured. In that context many different political ideas flourished, including religious freedom, both for and against. One of the Presbyterian opponents of what he saw as dangerous sectarians, especially Baptists, was Thomas Edwards. He wrote in 1646 lamenting that within five days as many books came out for religious toleration. One of them was Roger Williams' famous defence of Religious Freedom, *The Bloody tenet of Persecution*'. Edwards state his belief that all such books should be delivered to the hangman for public burning. 'Oh what a burnt offering, a sweet smelling sacrifice this would be to God!', he exclaimed.⁹

The influence of this intense debate about religious toleration would be felt first of all in the New World, rather than in England where the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 meant nearly 30 years of severe legal restrictions for Baptists and other dissenters. But from this ferment of religious ideas in the 1640s Roger Williams would later go to the New World to found a colony at Providence, Rhode Island, based on religious freedom for all, (though he himself moved from being a Baptist to being a Seeker). The same period would later influence John Locke to be instrumental in drawing up the Constitutions of Carolina, and William Penn the Constitution of Pennsylvania, all on the premise of a plural society which guaranteed religious freedom. The link of all this with Helwys may well come through John Murton, a member of Helwys' church and his successor as leader of the first Baptist church in England. Murton was also imprisoned for some time. But, influenced by Helwys, he wrote two works on religious freedom, one of which was later read by Roger Williams.

But back in 1612 none of these discussions were taking place. King James believed in his 'divine right' to rule his subjects, including determining their religion and ensuring religious conformity. Standing in direct opposition to this is Helwys' unqualified plea for religious freedom. *Let them be heretics, Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.*

⁹ Tomas Edwards 1646, cited in Timothy George, *Between Pacifism and Coercion: the English Baptist Doctrione of Religious Toleration*' Mennonite Quarterly Review 50/1 (January 1984), pp.30-31

INFLUENCES ON HELWYS

What were the influences on Helwys to develop this conviction? It may be a combination of a number of factors. We must remember that Helwys was an educated layman, with no formal theological training. He was very influenced by John Smyth, and his earlier writings reveal the closeness of his thought to Smyth. But as we have heard he later broke with Smyth on a number of theological issues, and also differed with him on a crucial aspect of the church-state relationship; whether a Christian believer could also be a magistrate. Helwys emerges as something of a free thinker and perhaps this enabled him to achieve the unique synthesis of thought that we see in his views on religious freedom and the relationship of church and state.

We will come in a moment to the undoubted influence on Helwys of Anabaptist thinking. But other factors may well have been present too. Helwys was a lawyer, having trained for the law at Grays Inn, London. In legal circles on the continent of Europe notions of Religious freedom were being debated and written about,, supremely of course by Hugo Grotius. But an interesting example for our purposes would be the Italian Protestant, Alberico Gentili (1552-1608), described as the 'father of religious toleration under law'.¹⁰ Gentili emigrated to England in 1580 where he later became Regius Professor of Civil law at Oxford University. In 1600 he was admitted to the legal fraternity of Grays Inn where Helwys had studied just a few years earlier. Despite the lack of direct evidence. It is a reasonable conjecture, I think, that as a lawyer Helwys might have been be familiar with the thinking of this prominent jurist.

In a passage written around 1590, Gentili wrote what in many ways is a legal equivalent of what Helwys would write from a more theological perspective 20 years later. Gentili wrote not only to oppose European wars in the name of religion but also to justify toleration of religious differences between states:

Religion is a matter of the mind and the will, which is always accompanied by freedom... Out minds and whatever belongs to the mind are not affected by any external power or potentate, and the soul has no master save God only, who alone can destroy the soul..... Religion ought to be free. Religion is a kind of marriage of God with man. And so, as liberty of the flesh is resolutely maintained in the other wedlock, so in this one freedom of the spirit is guaranteed.¹¹

I note here that the creative interaction between law and theology continues to be a key relationship in considering questions of religious freedom today.

Then in examining possible influences on Helwys we should not ignore the situation of the Separatists in England, whose ranks Helwys had so recently left. Their desire to see the true church emerge through separatism had clearly not occurred. They

¹⁰ by Malcolm D Evans in '*Religious Liberty and International Law in Europe*', Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 35-37

¹¹ Gentili, *De Iure Belli*, Book 1 Chapter IX, cited in Malcolm D Evans *op.cit.* p 36

were beginning to see those opposed to the State Church and its excesses fragmenting into different groups. It might seem a logical step as a persecuted minority to accept this situation of religious pluralism and envision a society where religious freedom was guaranteed to all. This could probably not come from anywhere else but a marginalised group rejected by mainstream society.¹² The challenge for this view of religious freedom has always been what you do with it if you ever become the powerful majority.

Helwys also had the experience of living for a few years in the free city of Amsterdam where the English separatists had worshipped in freedom. He observed the prosperity and security of the Netherlands and made the connection with religious liberty, declaring 'Behold the Nations where freedom of Religion is permitted, and you may see there are not more flourishing and prosperous Nations under heaven than they are.'¹³

And of course Helwys's own reflection on Scripture, especially the New Testament, also played its part. In his book he speaks of the Christ who in the Gospels refuses to force himself on anyone. This went along with the free will that characterised the Arminian understanding of salvation which Helwys had by this time embraced. (Arminius was developing his ideas in the Netherlands at the same time as the various separatist congregations were there, including that of Smyth and Helwys)

In spite of all these influences it remains an intriguing question as to what precise combination of factors brought together contributed to Helwys' radical understanding of the relationship of church and state and of religious freedom. James Coggins, in his work on Smyth's congregation in Amsterdam says that 'there is no obvious place Helwys could have learned such an understanding of church and state other than his own experience interacting with his theology and understanding of scripture'.¹⁴ But Coggins goes on to admit the possibility, (I would say probability), of influence by the Waterlander Mennonites in Amsterdam and it is this contact with Anabaptists thinking on which I want to focus now, and its creative interaction with other influences of the Reformers.

INTERACTION WITH ANABAPTISM

In Amsterdam the Separatist group led by John Smith made contact with the Waterlanders, a branch of the Mennonites. Eventually the church split on doctrinal and other issues and half the congregation led by Smyth joined the Waterlanders, the other led by Helwys returning to England. Like other Anabaptists groups, the Mennonites would put forward a view of religious toleration.

¹² See the discussion in James R Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence and the Elect Nation*. Waterloo Ont., Herald Press, 1991, pp. 128-132

¹³ Helwys *Objections Answered*, cited in: John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England 1558-1689*, Harlow UK, Longmans, 2000, pp.70-71

¹⁴ Coggins *op.cit.*, p132

The founder of the Mennonites in the 16th century, the Anabaptist Menno Simons, famously said that to 'throttle the truth' or to defend 'lies' 'with the sword' is not the way of Christ. He said, 'For this is the real disposition and conduct of Antichrist: to employ slander, arrest, torture, fire and murder against the spirit and the Word of God.'¹⁵

In many ways the Anabaptist movement, beginning in Zurich in the 1520s could be seen as having been primarily founded on this principle that the ruling authorities cannot determine the faith and religious practice of their people, or enforce conformity to it with the sword. Only reflection on the Word of God in Scripture and a listening to the Spirit of God could do this. 'We must obey God rather than men' was a watchword of the early Anabaptists. And much was made in their writings, (and indeed those of the early Baptists writing about religious toleration), of Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds (tares) to demonstrate those regarded as heretics should not be subjected to premature judgement by worldly rulers.¹⁶

We can perhaps assume that other Anabaptist writing on the subject would be known to the Waterlander Mennonites. For example, the Swiss Anabaptist Hans Denck had written in 1527 about what he called the 'practice of the true Gospel' being that '*each will let the other move and dwell in peace – be he Turk or heathen, believing what he will... That is to say, no one shall deprive another – whether heathen or Jew or Christian – but rather allow everyone to move in all territories in the name of his God. So may we well benefit in the peace which God gives.*'¹⁷ Denck's is a remarkable vision of a truly religiously plural society, living in peace, which perhaps goes even further than Helwys.

As has been said about the various strands of anabaptism, 'ideas have legs' and it seems to me in the way he expresses such an unqualified plea for religious liberty for all that Helwys must have imbibed something of the Anabaptist spirit here. In the same year, John Smyth had also written his own plea for religious freedom, if not quite as far-reaching as Helwys:

That the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, on matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine; but to leave Christian religion free, to every man's conscience and to handle only civil transgressions (Rom xiii), injuries and wrongs of man against man, in murder, adultery,

¹⁵ "Preface" to "Meditation on the Twenty-Fifth Psalm" (c. 1537) in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1491-1561*, trans. Leonard Verduin and ed. John Christian Wenger (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), p. 66.

¹⁶ So Balthasar Hubmaier, as quoted in Ed. Klassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, Waterloo Ont., Herald Press 1981, p. 292

¹⁷ Hans Denck, quoted in Ed. Klassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, Waterloo Ont., Herald Press, 1981

theft, etc., for Christ is the only king and lawgiver of the church and conscience (James iv.12).¹⁸

Note the emphasis here and in Helwys on the universal Lordship of Christ as the starting point for arguing for universal religious freedom. 'The crucial matters for Helwys are the sovereign right of Christ the king and the consequent holy nature of the human conscience before God'.¹⁹

In locating religious freedom in this view of the all-embracing Lordship of Christ, Helwys and the Anabaptists would be in agreement. However in exploring further the relationship between Helwys' thought and Anabaptism, there are some crucial distinctions to be made.

Both make a distinction between material and spiritual concerns. But for the Anabaptists the division was between the people and institutions of the true church, and the people and institutions of the world, the latter to be avoided wherever possible. So the pacifist Mennonites would not allow that a member of the church could also serve as a Magistrate to wield the 'earthly sword' of justice. I do not think it is too sweeping a statement to say that the Anabaptists came to their judgement on these matters by distancing themselves so far as possible from 'the world'.²⁰ This was a situation often forced on them physically and geographically as mainstream society hunted them down as threats to both the religious and the political order.

In bringing together his views on the relationship of church and state and religious freedom, for Helwys the division is not so much between the church and the world as that each human life divided in to its material and spiritual aspects. 'The body was subject to the world, subject to earthly kings, and able to use the physical sword. The spirit was subject only to spiritual authorities and spiritual penalties'²¹. On this reading, as Helwys writes in the preface of the copy of his book given to the king, '*The king hath no power over the immortal souls of his subjects*. Contrast this to the view of King James himself who famously said that it would only be half a king who controlled his subject's bodies but not their souls'.²²

One element which was shared by Helwys and the Anabaptists was the idea of a radical separation of Old and New Testament, corresponding to this dualism of body and spirit. Christendom had mainly relied on the Old Testament model of Israel for the view that the state should enforce religious conformity and have a right to intervene in their subjects' relationship to God. Helwys and the Anabaptists focused on the 'spiritual' nature of the New Testament and the church, and that the wheat

¹⁸ Smyth et al, *Propositions and Conclusions concerning True Christian Religion 1612-1614*, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, Philadelphia, Judson Press Revised Ed., 1969, p.140

¹⁹ Brian Haymes, *Thomas Helwys' The Mystery of Iniquity: Is it still Relevant in the Twenty-First century?*, in Ed. Cross and Wood, *Exploring Baptist Origins*, Oxford, Regent's Park College 2010, p. 69

²⁰ see Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists 1603-1649*, Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2006, pp. 73-74

²¹ Coggins. *op.cit.* p130

²² Quoted in James R Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation*, Waterloo, Ont., Herald Press 1991, p130

and the weeds (tares) must be allowed to grow together. This is the view that Christianity, as Roger Williams famously commented 'fell asleep in Constantine's bosom'

Nevertheless Helwys is interested in a full participation and engagement with English society acknowledging the fact that its executive authority was then invested in its King. He was a patriotic Englishman and a member of the English gentry and he wanted to show that in the matters that God has entrusted to him, the King deserved the unswerving loyalty of his subjects. The state was worthy of godly and patriotic support.

So in his book he pours lavish praise on the king and goes on, 'Let us declare what power and authority God has given to him, whereunto his subjects ought of conscience to obey'. Helwys goes on to list these areas before making it clear that whilst the king enjoys this power in the earthly kingdom, the Lord has reserved to himself a heavenly kingdom whose people are not subjects of the kingdom of the world (p34).

Altogether in the thought of Helwys we find an interesting creative fusion of anabaptist influence, the Two Kingdoms doctrine of Luther and the Calvinist conviction of all things being under the sovereignty of God and the sovereign rule of Christ.

Nevertheless the plea of Helwys and the early English Baptists for universal religious liberty distances them not only from the pacifist position of Anabaptists but also from the magisterial reformers. Their version of Luther's two kingdoms doctrine went far beyond Luther in secularising the state, so that it had no coercive power over religion. And though, Helwys was influenced by the Calvinist concept of an elect nation with a godly prince as it applied to England he denied the king any power over men's consciences.

But in this one sense, Helwys does behave like a classic Protestant in that he addresses the King as the Godly Prince. Rather than address his book to society at large, he is specific about directing it to the king. Whereas government for the Mennonites and Anabaptists was an impersonal rather distant force to be shunned, for Helwys it was close and personal and he wanted to be a critical friend to it.

But at the same time Helwys denied the king his earthly power to rule the heavenly realm, and in particular to appoint the bishops of the Church of England. It is in this context of a discussion about the King's rule in relation to the state church that Helwys makes his famous statement about religious freedom. In the wake of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 when a Catholic group tried to blow up the English King and Parliament, Helwys also argues that the Catholics would be more peaceable and the state itself was more secure if they had freedom of worship and were not forced to behave like political insurrectionists.

[General Baptist Leonard Busher, writing in 1614 commented on the *millet* system of limited religious toleration in the region ruled by the Ottomans commented that ‘Even the Turks in Constantinople “force no man to believe in Mahomet’s law” but leave Christians and Jews to the peaceful practice of their own religions. “Shall we be less merciful than the Turks, or shall we learn from the Turks to persecute Christians” ’²³]

The differences between Helwys and the Anabaptists can be particularly focused on their differing views on the possibility and role of a Christian magistrate, (for which read a Christian believer involved in government, especially in dispensing justice). With the notable exception of Balthasar Hubmaier the usual Anabaptist stance was a radical a-politicism and non-resistance, with the result that no Anabaptist believer could participate in society by becoming a magistrate and dispensing justice. Government, according to the Anabaptist Schleithem Confession, was ‘outside the perfection of Christ’.

The American Baptist historian and theologian Timothy George identifies three crucial points of the positive position on magistracy taken by Helwys and the early English Baptists: 1) a defence of the ethics of war, 2) a recognition that coercion was the necessary pre-condition of social order and religious toleration and 3) a willingness to admit magistrates to church membership. On the first point, in his writing Helwys showed himself ready to defend his king and country . ‘Our Lord the king hath power to take our sons and daughters to do all his service of war, and of peace, yea, all his servile service whatsoever’²⁴

On the second point, Helwys criticises the Dutch Mennonites for considering the office of magistrate ‘a vile thing’ yet had benefited from the security, freedom and peace which the magistrate by using the sword had won for them.

On the third point about the possibility of a Christian magistrate , Helwys, unlike John Smyth declared that ‘Kings, Princes and Magistrates, ruling and governing by the power of God, with the sword of justice, may be members of the church of Christ retaining their magistracie’²⁵ They could punish the criminal whilst praying for his soul.

Timothy George concludes that in these three aspects Helwys and the early English Baptists ‘remained faithful to the Calvinist-Puritan-Separatist tradition from which they had sprung’.

The effect of all this is that the concept of universal religious freedom which is certainly a radical departure from this tradition, is not affirmed ‘from a distance’ from government and political power. It is brought as an argument right into the centre, in this case to the King himself so that it might challenge the existing order in a direct way. And in many ways from the most unlikely of people. Helwys was probably what we would call a natural ‘social conservative’, originally a member of

²³ Cited in Timothy George op.cit. p46

²⁴ Mystery of Iniquity – find quote

²⁵ Helwys: *An Advertisement or Admonition*. Cited in Timothy George op. cit. p39

the educated privileged class of England. He cared passionately about the peace, security, good law and order of his country. He perhaps did not see that in taking this stance he did he was laying the ground for Christian political involvement in society²⁶. A Baptist magistrate was in fact very unlikely under King James, but if such a one existed then sooner or later there surely would have come the challenge to actively oppose unjust policies such as state compulsion in religion. As Stephen Wright concludes, Helwys' stance 'amounted to a theoretical foundation for political activism'.

HELWYS' LEGACY

It is time to conclude this discussion and ask what the legacy of Thomas Helwys is, both in the immediate aftermath of his life and then some challenges for us in the 21st century

As the seventeenth century went on Baptist defenders of religious freedom, (or at least, religious toleration) began to think seriously about what kind of society this might produce, and therefore what limits needed to be set on religious freedom within it.²⁷ Helwys cry of 'heretics, Turks, Jews or whatever' was somewhat modified by e.g. the Particular Baptist Confession of 1677 which professes liberty to all opinions *not contrary to Scripture* and the General Baptist Confession of 1678 which advocated only a limited religious freedom.²⁸ Individual Baptists wrote that magistrates must prevent the spread of heresy²⁹, or that Protestant, Jews and papists should only be allowed in their writings to appeal to Scripture and not to the Fathers.³⁰ Other Baptists who defended religious toleration also wished to assure puritan society that toleration need not mean licentious anarchy. They appealed to the concept of 'natural law' or 'the light of nature' and then set about trying to define what did or did not come under those headings. For instance there was a common view among some that the entire second table of the ten commandments could be deduced by natural reason, and therefore could be enforced by law.³¹ Some argued from Romans I that natural reason led to belief in a Deity who ought to be revered, and therefore atheism and blasphemy should be punished in all societies.

So from the immediate period following Helwys' book Baptists were greatly exercised about the implications of the radical tolerationist view so eloquently argued by Thomas Helwys and later by Roger Williams. They were already having to think seriously about the moral code of society and where the boundary lines might be drawn. The fact that no clear consensus emerged on this issue only serves to indicate the difficulty of holding together a commitment to religious freedom for all in a religiously pluralist nation, alongside a desire to see society ordered according

²⁶ Stephen Wright op.cit. pp.73-74

²⁷ J Coffey, 'From Helwys to Leland: Baptist and Religious Tolerance in England and America, 1612-1791' in Bebbington (ed) *Studies in Baptist History and Thought: The Gospel in the World* Paternoster 2002, pp21-2

²⁸ *Second London Confession 1677* Ch XXII:1 and *The Orthodox Creed 1678* Article XLVI, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, Rev Edn 1969 Judson Press

²⁹ eg. John Tombes in op.cit p22

³⁰ eg. Leonard Busher in op.cit p22

³¹ op.cit., p23

to Christian principles. I believe that this has continued to be a point of tension for Baptists and other Christians as they have taken their stance on religious freedom.

The historian John Coffey, from his study of 17th century religious life in England has identified three 'political visions' that Baptists have adopted in their history on this question religious freedom and its limits.³² The first is what he calls a radical separationist view, as espoused by Helwys and Williams. The state is a purely civil institution and 'its purpose is not promote a particular faith but to govern and order a multi-faith society, in which protestants Catholics, Muslims, pagans and even atheists enjoy the full rights of citizenship and dwell together in peace'.³³ Coffey estimates that this position has only been held by a substantial minority of Baptists over the centuries

The second political vision is of a theocratic apocalypticism with very little religious tolerance, as espoused by the Fifth Monarchists of the 17th century. Believing that God was about to establish his millennial kingdom on earth accompanied by the rule of the saints, they wanted to move quickly from pluralism to unity with no room for religious diversity. Only a minority of Baptists have ever been attracted to this, but Coffey concludes, 'Insofar as there are Baptists today who endorse the theocratic blueprint of Christian reconstructionism, a movement partly inspired by dreams of the millennium, this second vision survives'.³⁴

But Coffey sees the greatest proportion of Baptists as being firm upholders of what he calls the 'Christian nation' position, with its assumption that Christianity should be at the heart of the political nation. The holders of this view 'have not been averse to supporting systematic discrimination against "outsiders" who did not share the orthodox Protestant faith. It is not difficult to see how this has worked out in different ways in the concepts of 'Christian England' or 'Christian America'. I believe that in England it has led to some reluctance of Baptists to be true to their roots in full religious freedom because there are times when they have been very happy to hang on to the coat tails of the Established Church of England in its more ready access to the State on crucial issues.

Each of these positions leads to a different view of religious freedom and its limits. The first allows full religious freedom, and encourages dialogue about the collective morality of a society, but begs the question about how and where that moral consensus is to be achieved. The second is hardly tolerant at all of other religious beliefs and practices because of its imminent expectation of the full establishment of the Kingdom of God. The third tries to see everything through a consensus around the concept of a Christian society. a consensus which may be more wishfully imagined than real, and its proponents might used it to discriminate against divergent religious views, especially of other faiths

So despite our Baptist rhetoric on this issue, if we are to accept Coffey's thesis, the outworking of our Baptist commitment to religious freedom is not as straightforward as it might first appear. And I believe that is still the case today

³² op.cit. p34f

³³ op.cit.,2 p34

³⁴ op.cit., p35

CONCLUSION

In this year of the 400th Anniversary of Helwys's book you would expect me to want to call and challenge us in the 21st century to embrace the full scope of Helwys' radicalism. So in conclusion I have selected just three ways in which we might do this.

1. As the quote from Malcolm Evans at the beginning of this lecture reminds us, a real commitment to Religious freedom for *all* is still a challenge in the 21st century. Recently I have been to too many Consultations and Conference on the subject of human rights and religious freedom where different confessional groups are manoeuvring for their own advantages and rights, and not speaking up for the religious rights of all, especially those of other faiths, and especially those who may be suffering oppression. As the BWA General Secretary so succinctly put it in a recent article about the early Baptists, in his attitude to other Christian traditions Helwys does not come across as a tolerant man. He seems to have fully imbibed the polemical religious spirit of his time, fuelled by an imminent apocalypticism. But as I have argued, this aspect of his character and writing, somewhat repugnant to us in this irenic ecumenical age, makes his central conviction about religious freedom all the more remarkable. And for us today, Helwys reminds us that we can speak up for the rights of religious people everywhere to live and worship in freedom without necessarily agreeing with their ideas and beliefs or compromising our own faith. Article 18 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights, on religious freedom, enshrines this principle and we go on supporting it however others may treat us in return. A recent example would be the statement of the Swiss Reformed Church, supported by the Swiss Baptists among others, defending the right of Muslims to build their mosques with minarets, after a Referendum in Switzerland had opposed this.

2. Religious freedom can never seen in isolation from other freedoms. Whether he fully appreciated it or not, Helwys' radical stance of religious freedom had implications for the wider question of rights and responsibilities in society; implications which radicals such as Richard Overton, a member of the Amsterdam congregation of Smyth and Helwys, was to draw out in the 1640s when he laid some of the foundations of the modern concept of human rights.³⁵ There have been some tragic examples of Baptists being granted their freedom to worship unhindered, and then their gratitude for this preventing them being prophetic concerning the other injustices and evils around them in society. Recently this has been documented in relation to the situation of the German Baptists during the Nazi era. But in less obvious ways this can still be a weakness on our emphasis on religious freedom – that it can prevent us from speaking prophetically into our society about the abuse of other freedoms.

3, Helwys encourages us to have. a positive view of the state as the civil society guaranteeing religious freedom for all. Not only that, but he encourages us to

³⁵ See Glen Stassen, *The Christian Origin of Human Rights*, Chapter 6 in *Just Peacemaking*, Louisville KY, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, pp. 137-163

actively engage with it for the common good. One way to understand this might be to see the State as 'secular' and 'neutral'. But the experience in many countries in Europe is that a secular state which consigns religion to the private sphere is not morally neutral. And in fact, it increasingly threatens religious belief and freedoms in its espousal of secularism as an ideology.

Helwys was not prepared to accept the consigning of religious ideas to the private sphere, but instead addresses the king and the powers direct. Based on this, my preferred model in our time would be of a stakeholder society, where people of all faiths and none are in the public space with a unique contribution to make to the life, prosperity and transformation of society as a whole. In this respect Helwys' stance implies an acceptance of a multi-faith plural society in which he encourages active engagement rather than a withdrawal to the margins, or, indeed, any attempt to re-establish Christendom.

One example of such an engagement is the Baptist World Alliance response to A Common Word, the letter from moderate Muslim scholars to the leaders of the world Christian communities. It urges Muslims and Christians to seek to find ways of living at peace in the same geographical space, a peaceful co-existence based on love of God and love of neighbour. The BWA made a much-praised response (found on the website of A Common Word), in which it sought to both support such an initiative and also to make it clear that in the Helwys tradition we stand for religious freedom both for ourselves and all religions, whether in Islamic States, secular Europe or elsewhere.

Thomas Helwys would no doubt struggle to exist in the secular world which most of us now inhabit. For instance, I doubt whether he conceived of atheists in his plural society. But in these three ways and others I believe we can celebrate his courage and his achievement and yet remain true to his legacy and the rich heritage in which we stand 400 years later. May his bold words continue to inspire us!