

## Response to Tony Peck's paper on Thomas Helwys

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1. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to Tony's helpful paper from the perspective of inter-faith relations and on behalf of the BWA Commission for Baptist-Muslim Relations. I am sorry that our Commission Chair, Nabil Costa from the Lebanon, is not able to be with us for these meetings and to make this response as we had originally planned. Sadly the situation in the Middle East in general, and in Lebanon and Syria in particular, is currently so volatile that he has not felt able to travel to be with us. Our thoughts and prayers are with our brothers and sisters in such difficult times.

2. This sad reality is perhaps a good place to begin, recognising, as does Tony Peck in his paper, the significance of **Political Power**, and the ways in which, over many centuries, religious identity and political power have, in many parts of the world, become inextricably linked. This means that some of the inevitable differences between people of varying religious convictions and practices, have become overlain and complicated by association with powerful political and economic issues in various regions of the world.

Not only in the Middle East, with its complex history of relationships between the various people of the Abrahamic religions, but in some countries of sub-Saharan Africa between Christian and Muslim groups, in South Asia between Hindu nationalists and Muslim and Christian communities, in East Asia between various nationalist and Buddhist groups – in so many parts of the world we see the complex relationships between ethnic, cultural, religious and political identities which need careful reflection and response. Our inter-relationship is not one solely of difference of conscience and experience in matters of religion, but our involvement, whether we like it or not, is in the political and economic structures of our world.

3. This is closely related to my second point which is about the dangers of mutual **Perception and Misperception** between different faith communities. Our history reveals that there is a tendency for each community to misunderstand each other in many ways, but not least in relation to religious communities and their power and influence within particular political structures. For example there would be many people within the areas of the world where Islam is the majority tradition who perceive the West as monolithically 'Christian'. Of course western culture does indeed have a long history of engagement with the Judeo-Christian tradition/s, which have often given us some of our finer characteristics. But for several centuries now the West has been developing in conversation with post-Enlightenment philosophy, scientific secularism and capitalist economics, which, whatever benefits they may have brought, have not always shaped our common life in ways which accord with either the tradition of the Bible or that of our best theological minds. Few of us would wish to see the rampant consumerism and the moral relativism, which both pervade western culture today, as too closely associated with our Christian values. But to other eyes this decadence is all too easily assimilated with the Christian character of the western world.

Equally, much of popular culture in the West, whether Christian or secular, has responded to the re-emergence of Islam in the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia, as well as growing Muslim communities in Europe and North America, with a misunderstanding and misperception of Islam as a monolithic tradition, frequently characterised by political and cultural extremism.

In reality Islam is as diverse as Christianity and, if anything, has even fewer central authorities than the various Baptist denominations meeting here this week! Islam is a genuinely congregational tradition which predates the Baptists by almost a thousand years! Islam has hugely varying expressions both in cultural and linguistic form around the world, and its political influence in many parts of the world is equally fragmented. In many instances it is much less than is sometimes supposed by those outside the tradition. So it is important that we all recognise the diversity of our various traditions and the dangers of reading our religions simplistically in terms of political or other assumed forms of power, which the insiders of each community simply do not recognise or feel.

4. This leads to my third point: that misunderstanding and misperception all too frequently lead to **Misrepresentation**. Thomas Helwys wrote, as Tony reminded us, in turbulent times, and his book is in many ways a polemical tract. His understanding of his opponents, and of some of the issues at stake, was not always well-informed, and his tone was, to say the least, less than irenic!

In our own times, characterised as they are by political and economic insecurity and instability in many parts of the world, it is all too easy to speak without proper care and thought, and to misrepresent our neighbours from other cultures and traditions. If we do so (or perhaps more often, *when* we do so) we are in danger of contravening the Ninth Commandment which instructs us not to bear false witness against our neighbour. It is important continually to remind ourselves that we do not bear true witness to Christ – as we are commanded and are glad to do – when we bear false witness against our neighbour, however different he or she may be, and however difficult the political and economic conditions in which we are living.

This brings me to one of Tony's key points and the contemporary relevance of Helwys's remarkable legacy: that Helwys speaks as he does, from a position of political and economic weakness. I must myself then make these comments with some care and almost diffidence, speaking as a white western man with a secure position in one of the great bastions of western culture – the University of Oxford! Nevertheless, as a Baptist Christian I must remind myself, as I remind us all, that Helwys speaks from the margins of his society; he speaks with the voice of an excluded and often misrepresented a minority. It is from this perspective that he pleads not only for his own rights but for the rights of those with whom he profoundly, and judging by the tone of his writing we might also say *violently* disagreed. Yet his deeper constraint to bear faithful witness to Christ drives him to stand firm for the rights of others to live according to their own conscientious conviction. It is this deep Christocentric motivation which must also be central to our contemporary witness.

5. If our voice today is perhaps too frequently less certain than that of Helwys, it may be that we recognise that our Christian identity has too often been compromised by too close association for some of us with the political and economic systems which currently dominate our global society. But it might also reveal something even more challenging: that our own commitment to the sovereignty of Christ our Lord, is too fitful, fragile and flawed.

A rediscovery of the Puritan tradition of the 'Crown Rights of the Redeemer', which helped to shape early Baptist thought, might paradoxically enable us to recover the voice which enabled Helwys to speak the truth to power on behalf even of those who do not, and may never, acknowledge that Lordship themselves. Our central Baptist commitment to the Lordship of Christ is not only consistent with, but actually *requires*, my commitment to the freedom of conscience and religion of my neighbour, whoever and wherever and however difficult that may be.