

Biblical Christianity Promotes Religious Freedom

This article is the second of five papers under the general heading of 'How Christianity Changed the World'. They are adapted from a series of talks given by the author at Word Alive in April 2019. She has given us permission to publish all five in this and subsequent issues of the Bulletin.

One of the most common accusations levelled at Christians is the claim that Christianity has a shameful record of intolerance and persecution. What about the Crusades? Or the Inquisition?

How should we respond?

We don't have to be intimidated by these claims. It is the biblical world view that provides the most secure foundation of the rights of the individual, including the right to religious freedom.

Jesus taught that we are to, 'Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.' (*Mark 12:17*)

Caesar (*aka* the State) does not have the right to demand everything from you. You were not made in the image of Caesar. You were made in the image of the one who made Caesar. Caesar has no right to tell you what to believe. God, your Creator, alone has authority over your soul. God calls citizens to obey civil authorities (*Romans 13:1-8; 1 Peter 2:13-14*), but obedience is not to be unlimited. When there is a clash of demands, we obey God rather than men (*Acts 5:29*). We can infer from this that governments should not coerce the consciences of their citizens. As the apostle Peter wrote, we are to *honour* the Emperor – but we are to *fear* God (*1 Peter 2:17*).

To understand the basis for respecting religious freedom we need to go back to creation. Man and woman are made in God's image; they are rational beings, given the capacity to worship, love and relate. Genuine worship, love and relationship cannot be coerced. God calls his people to '*choose the good*' (*Deuteronomy 30:15*). The Old Testament contains numerous condemnations of external religious ritual, performed without the free and willing love of the heart. God promised the good of the land to those who *willingly* obey him. (*Isaiah 1:19-20*).

Building on this biblical foundation, several of the early church fathers developed arguments in favour of religious freedom as an individual natural right possessed by all people, regardless of religious convictions. Tertullian (c.155-240 AD) used the phrase 'religious liberty' for the first time in history in his *Apology*, written c.197 AD. He warned magistrates:

See to it that you do not end up fostering irreligion by taking away freedom of religion and forbid free choice with respect to divine matters, so that I am not allowed to worship what I wish, but am forced to worship what I do not wish. Not even a human being would like to be honoured unwillingly.¹

Tertullian went on to argue that religion consists of more than rituals – it has to come from inner conviction; superficial observance makes a mockery of genuine piety. Persecution will never result in genuine devotion. Ten years later, when Christians were undergoing persecution in Carthage, North Africa, Tertullian wrote a letter to the Roman Governor in which he argued:

It is a fundamental human right, a privilege of nature that every man should worship according to his own convictions: one man's religion neither harms nor helps another man. It is assuredly no part of religion to compel religion – to which free-will and not force should lead us.²

When the Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, this did not 'impose' Christianity on the Empire (that would, regrettably, come later). The Edict allowed Christianity to operate freely. The Edict has

¹ Quoted in Wilken, R L, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom*, Yale University Press, 2019, 11.

² Quoted in Hertzke, A D and Shah, T S, eds., *Christianity and Freedom: Volume I Historical Perspectives*, CUP, 2016, 8.

been called 'the world's first universal declaration of religious freedom'. Christians and all others were to have the free and unrestricted right to follow that mode of religion which to each of them appeared best.

The theologian Lactantius (c. 250-325) lived in North Africa in the fourth century. He proposed a policy of religious freedom to Emperor Constantine, a policy demanded by both justice and piety:

...the butcher's trade and piety are two very different things... if you want to defend religion by bloodshed, torture and evil, it will not be defended – it will be polluted and outraged. There is nothing that is so much a matter of willingness as religion...³

Lactantius taught that humans made in God's image are endowed with a conscience, and he defended the right of each individual to follow their conscience. He was adamant that laws may punish offences, but they cannot change the conscience.

Disastrously, within about ten years, Constantine's policy had become more coercive. Over time 'the Church was transformed from a voluntary association into a public institution',⁴ and 'obedience to Caesar and obedience to God began to merge'.⁵ By the fifth century some Christian theologians such as Augustine were arguing for coercion against the Donatists and others deemed to be heretics.⁶ In subsequent years, the early foundational thinking in favour of freedom of conscience did re-appear.

Alcuin (c. 735-804) was one of the leading educationalists of the eighth century. Born in Northumbria, he transformed the curriculum at the Cathedral school in York. He was then invited by Charlemagne to join his court in Aachen in 782. Alcuin taught Charlemagne himself, as well as his sons and daughters. He was internationally recognised as one of the most brilliant men of the age. He tried to persuade the future Emperor not to impose Christian ways on the Saxons. He wrote:

Faith arises from the will, not from compulsion. You can persuade a man to believe, but you cannot force him. You may even be able to force him to be baptised, but this will not instil the faith within him.⁷

This biblical principle was undermined, and all too often forgotten during the 'sacral' era. This was the period of history when it was assumed that a territory had to have a single faith. It was thought that there would be disorder and fragmentation if that unity were undermined. The terrible outcome of that was the persecution of dissenters. *The Pilgrim Church*⁸ is an account of dissent through those centuries during which religious unity was enforced. It gives a vivid picture of believers' churches (or gathered churches) which were all too often vilified as heretical and violently persecuted.

Today, Christians would unequivocally agree that such persecution was wrong, and not a real reflection of true Christianity. We understand (and concede) that the accusations of atrocities sometimes made against Christianity may be warranted criticism of the intolerance which was the inevitable result of 'sacral' thinking.⁹

By the sixteenth century, the 'sacral principle' (that church and state were coterminous), had obscured the biblical truth of religious freedom. During the Reformation, the mainstream or magisterial reformers such as Luther and Calvin recovered the biblical truth about salvation, but they maintained the territorial (or 'sacral') principle that everyone in a territory should belong to the same church. They bitterly opposed those who believed that Scripture demanded gathered churches of professing believers. The magisterial

³ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, V 19, 23 quoted in *Christianity and Freedom*, 9-10.

⁴ *Liberty in the Things of God*, 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶ In the first instance, the use of force against the Donatists was justified because some of them had turned to violence. *Liberty in the Things of God*, 31.

⁷ *Christianity and Freedom*, 68.

⁸ Broadbent, E H, *The Pilgrim Church*, Lulu Press, reprint 2018.

⁹ Although we should, equally, be aware that there has often been exaggeration and distortion in descriptions of both the Inquisition and the Crusades. See Stark, R. *Bearing False Witness: Debunking Centuries of Anti-Catholic History*, Templeton Press, 2016; and Stark, R. *God's Battalions: The Case for the Crusades*, HarperOne, 2009.

reformers stood *with* the Roman Catholics in enforcing the death penalty on those who believed that baptism should follow profession of faith, rather than be administered to all infants born within a certain territory.

The so-called 'Anabaptists', and then the Baptists, recovered the foundational biblical principle of liberty of religion. One leading Anabaptist was Balthasar Hubmaier. He wrote a powerful plea for religious freedom in 1524: *Concerning Heretics and those who burn them*. He accepted that magistrates have a duty to uphold law and order, but he denied their power to enforce religion. He wrote:

Now it is obvious to everyone... that the law which demands the burning of heretics is an invention of the devil.¹⁰

Similarly, Claus Felbinger:

God wants no compulsory service. On the contrary, He loves a just, willing heart that serves Him with a joyful soul and does what is right joyfully.¹¹

The *Schleitheim Confession* (an Anabaptist confession of faith) was written in 1527, in a context where magistrates used torture and the death penalty to enforce religion. It acknowledged that God gives magistrates authority to punish evil and promote good (Romans 13) but it *denied* that God gives magistrates authority to enforce religion. It is a commonly repeated slander that Anabaptists rejected *all* civil authority. What this confession *did* reject was the idea that true believers could serve as magistrates. That is because in their particular historical context serving as a magistrate would necessarily involve the enforcement of religious intolerance.¹²

The first full defence of religious liberty in English was written by the Baptist Thomas Helwys (c.1575-1616) in 1612. His biblical treatise against religious persecution was called *The Mystery of Iniquity*. He had the audacity to send a personally inscribed copy to King James I, writing:

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 betwixt God and themselves, the King shall not answer for it; neither may the King be judge between God and men.¹³

Helwys believed that to be genuine, religious faith has to be voluntary. Forced faith is no faith at all. The king has no power to coerce the soul. Each individual answers to God alone in matters of religion. Helwys argued that freedom of conscience should be granted to all, including Catholics, Jews and Muslims. James I was not impressed. Helwys was imprisoned in Newgate, in horrible conditions, and died there in 1616.

The next landmark biblical defence of religious freedom, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for the Cause of Conscience Discussed*,¹⁴ was written in 1644 by the Baptist Roger Williams (1603-1683). He had come to strong Puritan convictions while studying at Cambridge University and in 1631 he sailed to Massachusetts. He argued that force never produces genuine faith, that forced worship is abominable to God and that people's consciences ought never to be violated or constrained. He maintained that the magistrate has no place in controlling the church:

That religion cannot be true which needs such instruments of violence to uphold it.¹⁵

¹⁰ Estep, W R, *The Anabaptist Story*, Eerdmans, 1975, 197.

¹¹ *The Anabaptist Story*, 197.

¹² Williams, G H, *The Radical Reformation*, Westminster Press, 1962, 184-5.

¹³ <http://www.centerforbaptiststudies.org/resources/iniquity.htm> (accessed 11 December, 2019)

¹⁴ In modern English, we might say 'The Bloodthirsty Principle of Persecution'. Online version:

<https://archive.org/details/cu31924029333014/page/n21>

¹⁵ Roberts, M, *The Subversive Puritan, Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, Evangelical Press, 142.

He compared forced conversion to spiritual rape.¹⁶

The Protectorate (1653-9) offered a brief interlude of greater religious freedom in England. Oliver Cromwell believed that freedom of conscience should be extended not just to professed Christians, but also to Jews (and to any who were not a threat to the civil order).¹⁷ But the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 ushered in an era of fierce persecution. The great Puritan John Owen (1616-1683) argued in *Truth and Innocence Vindicated* that thought and worship should be free. He criticised magistrates for invading God's prerogative to govern the souls of men. He drew on the writings of Tertullian and Lactantius, and argued that liberty of conscience is not based on the law of society, but on the law of nature. Liberty of conscience is a consequence of human freedom: 'Liberty is necessary unto human nature.'¹⁸

William Penn (1644-1718), was converted in 1659 at the age of 15. Aged 22, he joined the Quaker movement, which meant that his family, for a while, disinherited him. He was imprisoned several times in the Tower of London due to his faith. Famously, in 1670, a judge ordered the jury to find him guilty; they refused. The judge then fined and imprisoned the jury. This created a famous test case when twelve other judges found in favour of the jury, and ruled that juries should not be subject to intimidation. William Penn was the founder of the colony of Pennsylvania, and was famous for his fair and good relations with the Lenape North American Indians. He insisted that faith is the gift of God, so it cannot be forced, and that force may make hypocrites, but it can make no converts. He argued that denial of liberty of conscience is:

...an affront to God, for it invades the divine prerogative, and divests the Almighty of a Right due to none beside himself.¹⁹

John Locke (1632-1704) wrote his *Letters Concerning Toleration* between 1689 and 1692 in the aftermath of the European wars of religion. He argued that toleration is the chief characteristic mark of the true Church and that belief cannot be compelled by violence.²⁰

At the roots of the Christian articulation of the importance of religious liberty are the following principles:

- Religion is an inner conviction that cannot be coerced
- Every human being is made in the image of God so should be afforded dignity
- Each individual should be free to follow their religious conscience
- God is only honoured when devotion and worship are willingly and freely given

At one time these were radical ideas, but today, whatever our genuine differences of conviction about either baptism, or the established church, we would all agree on the need for freedom of conscience.

The situation today

Where the transcendent God is not acknowledged, all too often the State 'becomes God' and takes on the function of controlling belief. For example, as mentioned in part 1 of this series, under Communist governments, so called 'enlightenment atheism' regards religion as a 'false consciousness' which should be eliminated through propaganda and 're-education'. Militant atheism treats religion as an anti-revolutionary social force which must be suppressed by political measures.

But when the transcendent God is respected, we understand that each individual made in his image is answerable to their Creator for the state of their heart. We are to obey God not Caesar if there is a clash of loyalty.

¹⁶*ibid.*, 133.

¹⁷ Which is why Roman Catholics were not included; they were thought to be a threat to the civil order as their first loyalty was to the authority of the Pope.

¹⁸ John Owen, quoted in *Liberty in the Things of God*, 164.

¹⁹ Penn, W, *The Great Case of Liberty of Conscience*, quoted in *Liberty in the Things of God*, 167.

²⁰ *Liberty in the Things of God*, 169 ff.

Christians understand that we don't just appeal for religious 'toleration'. That implies that it is a gift that can be given or withheld by the civil authorities. Rather we insist that religious freedom, or liberty of conscience, is a natural right that belongs to all people made in the image of God. A biblical understanding of this principle is the only sure bulwark against totalitarianism – the overweening claims of an all-powerful state. That is why Christians today play a disproportionately large role in advancing religious freedom as a universal right:

Because Christianity denies that the state is the ultimate arbiter of human life, it challenges all attempts – whether Communist, theocratic, ethnic nationalist, or authoritarian – to impose a single authority in state and society... Careful field research demonstrates the outsized role of Christian communities in defending religious freedom and human rights... Pledging fealty to an authority higher than the state, Christians strive to carve spaces for autonomous civil society and conscience rights that underpin democratic governance.²¹

Certainly, we should grieve that through the centuries there have been times when the institutional church, in the name of Christ, has engaged in religious persecution and intolerance. But we need to be clear that these were an appalling perversion of biblical teaching, and we can be confident: God's Word is the foundation for upholding religious liberty.

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²¹ Hertzke, A D, 'Introduction: Christianity and Freedom in the Contemporary World', in *Christianity and Freedom*, Volume 2, CUP, 2016, 4, 11.