Protestantism, Early Baptists and the Emergence of Human Rights

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The development of modern understandings of human rights is widely attributed to Enlightenment thinkers, but Christians had constructed similar arguments even earlier. This article traces that history with primary reference to three early Baptists whose worldviews were shaped by the intolerance they experienced.

The idea of human rights is widely accepted as a foundation of legislation and political action. It is the cornerstone of liberal democracies, the ideal held out against oppression and injustice all over the world. At the same time, it arouses debate and criticism from all parts. Different groups fight for different causes while appealing to the same principle of human rights.

There is also disagreement over the origin of the modern conception of human rights. The commonly held view that human rights are the fruit of the European and American Enlightenment in the 18th century has been questioned. In this article, I show how Protestant Christianity, especially the Baptist movement in the early 17th century, played a crucial role. I want not only to set the historical record straight, but also to consider how the particular origins of human rights are relevant for the development of this principle in today's societies.

Definition

According to one formal definition, 'Human rights are rights belonging to every human being, which every (appropriately situated) human being is obligated to respect.'[1] These rights are held by all persons equally, irrespective of their citizenship, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other specific attributes. They are inalienable: you cannot lose these rights any more than you can cease to be human.[2]

In claiming these human rights, everyone also accepts the responsibility not to infringe on the rights of others and to support those whose rights are abused or denied.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations in 1948, consists of 30 articles defining the basic civil rights that must be respected by every UN member state. It states, 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. … Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.'

In Europe and in the Western world at large, human rights are the ultimate frame of reference for the struggle against injustice, poverty and discrimination. They are foundational principles of the Council of Europe and the European Union.

Debate

Since the UDHR of 1948, there has been an ongoing discussion about the interpretation of certain human rights, while others have sought to add new rights to the list. In many parts of the world, human rights are criticized as biased by 'Western thinking'.

Even within the European realm, there are quite different reactions. An increasing number of Europeans are concerned about the way in which human rights are defined and worked out in liberal democracies today. While some advocate for freedom of abortion, euthanasia and

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[1] Michael J. Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 47.
[2] Pam Costain, 'Moving the Agenda Forward', *Connection to the Americas* 14, no. 8 (October 1997): 4.

same-sex marriage in the name of human rights, others see this as an undermining of key moral values and appeal to principles of human rights to defend their view as well.

In this paper, I highlight three Baptists who played a pioneering role in the emergence of human rights: Thomas Helwys, Richard Overton and Roger Williams. Before that, I will offer some general remarks about the history of human rights.

The history of human rights: getting the record straight

How and where did the idea of universal human rights emerge? As Richard Amesbury has stated:

> Human rights are said to be universal, but *thinking* about human rights, and the *language* in which this thought is expressed, is neither universal nor ahistorical. Like all moral discourse, it developed in a particular time and place, in response to various historical forces.[3]

The Enlightenment

According to the conventional and still popular view, human rights are a fruit of the Enlightenment.[4] From the late 17th century onwards, as Europe was in the aftermath of devastating religious wars and still wrestling with the principle of religious tolerance, Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Baron Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison attempted to provide a secular, rationalist basis for the governance of society. They developed the idea that every person, by virtue of the fact that he or she is a human being, is entitled to certain civil rights and should be granted certain individual freedoms—in particular, the freedom of opinion and of religious practice.

The first documents to enshrine this view were the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of the French Revolution (1789). These two declarations were ground-breaking in Western political history. They marked the beginning of a process by which basic human rights would eventually become enshrined in national constitutions and international agreements such as the Geneva conventions and the UDHR.

Earlier origins

But this view is inadequate, because it ignores the preceding historical context. In fact, Enlightenment philosophers took up ideas that had developed previously in the context of European Christianity. Historians who take a critical look at the origin of universal human rights point out that these are not different from 'natural' and 'constitutional' rights that had been defined at an earlier stage. One of those historians, John Witte, explains:

> It is now clear that the Enlightenment was not so much a wellspring of Western rights as a watershed in a long stream of human rights theory and law that had already drawn in classical and biblical sources, Roman and civil law, medieval philosophy and canon law, early modern Catholic and Protestant law and theology, and more. It is a telling anecdote that, by 1650, every right that would appear in the United States Bill of Rights had already been defined, defended, and died for by various Protestants and Catholics of their day.[5]

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[3] Richard Amesbury and George Newlands, *Faith and Human Rights: Christianity and the Global Struggle for Human Dignity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 41.

[4] Amesbury and Newlands, *Faith and Human Rights*; Danièle Lochak, *Les droits de l'homme* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002).

[5] John Witte, 'Roots and Routes of Rights', https://tif.ssrc.org/2015/07/01/roots-and-routes-of-rights/. He reacts to the thesis put forward by Samuel Moyn in *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (2010), which contends that human rights as they are now understood, i.e. as an international standard of morality or justice, began to emerge only during the 1970s.

Human rights are embedded in a long history of rights discourse in the Western Christian tradition. Its roots go even further back to Roman understandings of rights, and to theories of liberty developed in the city-states of ancient Greece.

Heritage of Christianity

The emergence of universal human rights has a general background and a specific context. The general background is European Christianity. According to the Judeo-Christian worldview, there is only one God who has created all things including mankind, so there is only one humanity. Moreover, God has created man in his image, which implies that every human being has an individual moral status. This notion became foundational for the Christian world and later for Western liberalism. Larry Siedentop calls it 'the invention of the individual'. Enlightenment philosophers liked to trace their ideas further back to the writings of Greek and Roman philosophers, but as Siedentop points out, their emphasis on individual freedom stands in sharp contrast with the inequality of the Roman and Greek societies and the inegalitarian views of their philosophers. They owe their ideas largely to Christian thinking.[6]

Christianity also gave birth to the notion of universal equality. A major inspirational source has been the apostle Paul's repeated exhortation that 'in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, Barbarian nor Scythian' (Gal 3:28 and Col 3:11).

The cultures and the societies of Europe are profoundly marked by the legacy of Athens, Rome and Jerusalem. French political scientist Jean-Claude Guillebaud summarizes this legacy:

> Jewish prophetism has given us a view of time that underlies the idea of progress.
> To Christianity we owe both the concept of the individual and the desire for equality.
> Greece has invented reason. Hellenism of the first centuries, and notably Paul of Tarsus, have fixed a certain image of the universal.
> The Judeo-Christian message has produced a concept of justice that was received and secularized by the Enlightenment.[7]

Clearly, all these basic notions have a bearing on what we now understand by universal human rights. Enlightenment philosophers couched such ideas in secular language and gave them a rational foundation to make them universal, although virtually all Enlightenment authors believed in God as the creator of the universe and the originator of natural law.

The crucial role of Protestantism

This brings us to the specific context in which human rights emerged, i.e. Protestantism and the period of religious conflicts in Europe. Protestantism played a crucial role in two respects. First, it brought a heightened awareness of the moral status of the individual. The various Reformation movements all agreed that a person does not depend on the institutional church and the sacraments for his or her salvation. By emphasizing the personal responsibility of each person before God, the Protestant faith marked a new phase in concern for each individual's moral state.

Second, Protestantism led *de facto* to a plurality of expressions of the Christian faith in European societies. Besides the Roman Church in the West and the Orthodox Church in the East, there was now a variety of Protestant churches, emerging from several Reformation movements. Along with Lutherans, Calvinists and Zwinglians, there were more radical Reformers who had dissenting or 'non-conformist' views on church order and the Christian

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[6] Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2014; New York: Penguin, 2015).

[7] Jean-Claude Guillebaud, *La refondation du monde* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 89.

life. Some of them practised believers' baptism (for which they were labelled anabaptists or 'rebaptizers').

Could all these churches co-exist? Should this be allowed? If so, to what extent and under which conditions? At that time, religion was not only a matter of personal conviction but a key means of maintaining public order.

Catholics held largely to the model of one church cooperating closely with the political powers. In this model, the unity of religion was considered necessary for social cohesion, so there was no room for alternative forms of Christianity, while Jews were tolerated only within the confines of their marginalized existence. How did Protestants respond to religious plurality? There were three approaches.

The first approach: an established church on a regional basis

It seemed a logical implication of the Protestant faith that people should be allowed the freedom to follow their conscience as far as their religious conviction was concerned. Over and against Catholic princes and prelates, Protestants appealed to their conscience in confessing their reformed views of the church and Christian faith, as Luther did famously at the Diet of Worms. However, many theologians, city magistrates and princes belonging to the so-called mainline Protestant churches found it difficult to grant the same freedom of conscience to adherents of other Protestant confessions. Many Protestant leaders held on to the idea of one society and one church, with the only difference being that the established church should now be Protestant. This model left minimal space for a plurality of confessions. As a result, there was strife and conflict, not only between Protestants and Catholic minorities but also between Protestants of different persuasions. One tragic example was the expulsion of Anabaptists from Bern and Zurich, cities that had opted for the reforms of Zwingli.

The peace treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which put an end to the Thirty Years' War, adopted the same approach: in each of its states, the church of the prince should be the established one (*cuius regio, eius religio*).

The second approach: religious tolerance

Others interpreted the consequences of the insistence on personal responsibility before God by saying that people who disagreed with the established (Catholic or Protestant) church should not be forced to adopt its doctrine and worship practice, and that their own churches should be tolerated, provided that they did not disrupt public order or put the country in danger. These Protestants accepted a certain degree of plurality within the Christian world.

This approach was defended more often by magistrates and princes than by theologians and church leaders. A classic example is Sébastien Castellion, pastor and Bible translator in Geneva. In 1553, Michael Servetus was arrested and brought before the city magistrates because of his views on the Trinity. He was quickly condemned and burned at the stake. During the process, Calvin served as prosecutor and theological expert. In February 1554, Calvin published his 'Declaration to Maintain the True Faith',[8] in which he argued that it is the duty of the political and judiciary authorities to condemn heretics and have them executed when their heresy is serious and a real danger to public order.

Castellion publicly took issue with Calvin's position and pleaded for tolerance. He published a text in which he criticized the Protestant governors: 'Before they have come to power, they detested the persecutors, but now that they have become strong, they follow the example of persecutors.'[9] Then he wrote a pamphlet 'against the seditious writing of Calvin'.

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[8] Jean Calvin, *Déclaration pour maintenir la vraie foi* (Geneva, 1554).
[9] *Traité des Hérétiques,* published under the pseudonym of Basile Montfort (Geneva, 1554), par. 8.

It was not authorized by the censors, but handwritten copies were distributed secretly.[10] Whereas Calvin stated that right doctrine needs to be defended, Castellion's response has become famous: 'To kill a man is not defending a doctrine, it is killing a man.'[11] He argued that no magistrate has the right to condemn someone to death only for his doctrines. A crime should be punished, but a false doctrine is not a crime. It calls for refutation 'with arguments and writings', not for punishment.

The Servetus case was extreme. Intolerant Protestant magistrates often had dissidents imprisoned, sometimes expelled, but hardly ever executed. But this case brought to light the divergence between two approaches in the Protestant world, one repressive and the other tolerant.

The tolerant approach, of which Castellion was an early example, did not mean total liberty of opinion. Castellion opposed condemning Jews and Muslims but argued that the authorities should sanction 'blasphemous' and 'atheist' persons, although they should not go as far as to put them to death. By 'atheists' he meant people who refuse the elementary rules of moral conduct, as a consequence of not believing in God, the author of the natural law. They should be punished for their actions and their behaviour, according to Castellion. His position is typical of the position that was adopted by other relatively tolerant scholars and governors.

Similar views were presented by the Dutch Catholic writer Coornhert, who quoted Castellion in his *Manifesto against the Execution of Heretics* (1566), and Prince William of Orange, who defended the cause of the Protestants and led the revolt of the Dutch provinces against their Spanish rulers. In the provinces where Calvinism became the privileged religion, other Protestant groups, mostly refugees from other countries, were tolerated in some cities and under certain conditions. Catholics in these provinces could meet only in hidden places. Amsterdam became a haven of refuge for persecuted Protestants, Catholics and Jews alike.

The Hungarian Reformed pastor Ferencz Davidis influenced King John Sigismund of Transylvania to issue the first edict of tolerance in history (1568), granting freedom of worship to all the different Christian confessions in his territory. In 1596, King Henry IV of France issued the famous Edict of Nantes, giving French Protestants freedom of worship and education in a limited number of cities.

The third approach: the Radical Reformation and the call for religious liberty

Tolerance meant freedom in a limited way. It was usually not granted to all, and it did not imply that the tolerated groups were now on equal footing with the dominant group. As a result, the more radical Reformers often paid a heavy price for their convictions. Their leaders, such as John Bunyan, were frequently imprisoned or martyred. Others fled or were forced into exile.

The Radical Reformers went further than tolerance. They called into question the authority of civil authorities and of the established state church in matters of religious opinion and religious practice. In these circles one finds, for the first time in European history, a plea for religious liberty as a universal human right, not only for Christians of different confessions but for all, whatever their religious or non-religious persuasion.

Thomas Helwys

The Baptist movement in England was one of several dissenting or non-conformist Protestant movements of that time that disagreed with the official Anglican Church in matters of theology, church order and Christian discipline. Baptist Thomas Helwys (c. 1550–1616) fled from persecution to Amsterdam, where he joined the assembly of English refugees. Formed in 1604 and led by pastor John Smyth, this was the first Baptist church in history. In

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[10] Sébastien Castellion, *Contre le libelle de Calvin après la mort de Michel Servet* (1554; current edition Geneva, Éditions Zoé, 1998).
[11] Castellion, *Contre le libelle,* par. 14/2, 419.

1611, Helwys wrote the earliest Baptist confession of faith, called *A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland*. That same year, he returned to England where he founded the first Baptist church in that country, in Spitafields. Helwys was arrested because of his advocacy for religious liberty for all people regardless of creed. He died in prison in 1616.

In 1612, Helwys published *The Mystery of Iniquity*, which has become a Baptist classic.[12] In this work, amongst other topics, he described the absurdity of coerced uniformity in worship practices, the legitimacy of the state and the proper role of the magistrates, and Jesus Christ as the sole King of the church. The title comes from 2 Thessalonians 2:7 where Paul speaks of 'the mystery of lawlessness' (iniquity). For Helwys, this was 'a working power of Satan', and he saw this evil especially in the policy of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches that conspired with governments to deny freedom of conscience to those who disagreed with their theology and practices. More generally, the 'mystery of iniquity' was 'the spirit of domination and oppression'.[13]

Not tolerance of some but freedom for all

One of the most important themes in *The Mystery of Iniquity* is religious liberty. In fact, this pamphlet is the first English document in recorded history calling for complete freedom of conscience in matters of religion. Whereas John Smyth, often considered the founder of the Baptist movement, wanted freedom of conscience for all Christians, Helwys claimed it for every human being, including those with whom he found himself in fundamental disagreement, such as Jews, Muslims ('Turks') and adherents of any other non-Christian religion:

> For men's religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be 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. This is made evident to our lord the king by scriptures.[14]

Helwys had the audacity to send a personal, autographed copy to James I, king of England and Scotland from 1603 to 1625. On a handwritten page, he reminded the monarch that he too was a mortal being, 'dust and ashes', with no power over the immortal souls of his subjects:

> I ask whether there be so unjust a thing and of so great cruel tyranny under the sun as to force men's consciences in their religion to God, seeing that if they err, they must pay the price of their transgressions with the loss of their souls. Oh, let the king judge, is it not most equal [fair] that men should choose their religion themselves, seeing they only must stand themselves before the judgement seat of God to answer for themselves, when it shall be no excuse for them to say we were commanded or compelled to be of this religion by the king or by them that had authority from him?[15]

King James reacted by having Helwys put in prison as soon as he set his feet on English soil again.

For Helwys, religious liberty was a right for everyone and no parliament had the right to legislate against it. No monarch could overrule it. His ideas predated the thinking of John Locke and other Enlightenment philosophers by almost a century!

Argumentation

Helwys and other early Baptists framed their arguments in the familiar language of two swords: the sword wielded by the civil authorities and that of the ecclesial authorities. They

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[12] Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1611/1612), ed. Richard Groves (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998).
[13] Helwys, *A Short Declaration*, 26.
[14] Helwys, *A Short Declaration*, 57.
[15] Helwys, *A Short Declaration*, 37.

insisted that the king's authority and power are limited to civil affairs, and that any attempt to legislate beyond those bounds, particularly in matters pertaining to the soul, infringes upon what belongs solely to God. That is, for the king to compel religious belief is to usurp not just the rights of the autonomous human individual, but finally also the sovereignty of God.

Jason Whitt has summarized the arguments of English Baptists for religious liberty. The key point at issue for them was salvation. They advanced two arguments. The first was the hope that all persons who might be saved would be saved:

Baptist leaders sought to convince the English authorities, both civil and ecclesial, that the proper concern for Christians is the salvation of all those who would come to Christ. To punish non-believers by exclusion from the public life of the nation, or to inflict on them torture or death because they would not believe (or believed wrongly), is counter to the very purpose of Christ who is willing to hold off judgment to the end.[16]

Second, enforced conformity to a certain church actually works contrary to the purposes of God, because it leads people to adopt the practices and rites outwardly, without inner faith conviction. Helwys argues that conformance without real conversion 'fails to bring salvation', that it leads to superficial faith, and that it fosters hypocrisy.

Third, Helwys expresses the concern that in any country where faith is enforced under the threat of persecution, people who are not of the faith will avoid that realm. As a result, in such a land there will be no opportunities for true evangelistic witness.[17]

Richard Overton

The second precursor I will feature is Richard Overton (c. 1597–1663). In his study of the heritage of early Baptist movements, Glen Stassen observed that 'the story of Richard Overton's development of the concept of human rights is surprisingly unknown.'[18]

Overton may have become an Anglican priest (of the Puritan party). In 1615, he left for Amsterdam where he joined the Baptist congregation originally led by John Smyth, just after it had merged with the Waterland Mennonites upon Smyth's death in 1612. Overton also spent some time in Germany around the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). This experience left him with a profound and passionate hatred for religiously inspired violence.

Despite some claims that Overton had dubious theological views,[19] he remained a faithful member of the General Baptist Congregation in London for the rest of his life. During the English Civil War (1625–1649), Overton became one of the best-known representatives of the Levellers movement, laying out a vision of radical democracy, social equality and religious freedom. In his pamphlets, he pleaded for universal (male) suffrage, a government that was responsive to the people and the common good, and the right of every citizen to petition Parliament and to participate in government regardless of his religion.

Overton was arrested for his views, but thanks to a sustained campaign of petitioning he was released. He then became involved in conspiracies against the government and had to flee to Amsterdam in 1655. The plots came to nothing, and Overton returned to England. Details of his later life are uncertain.

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[16] Jason D. Whitt, 'The Baptist Contribution to Liberty', *Freedom* (journal of the Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University), 2011: 38.

[17] Whitt, 'The Baptist Contribution to Liberty', 38.

[18] Glen Harold Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 141.

[19] In *Man's Mortalitie* (1644), Overton argued that the human soul as well as the body is subject to death, but that both will be resurrected at the last judgement. This belief was widespread among General Baptists but denounced as heretical by Presbyterians.

'Father of human rights'

Like Helwys before him, Overton pleaded for complete religious liberty, not only for non-conformist and Anabaptist groups to which he belonged, but also for Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims. Overton is sometimes called 'the father of human rights', because he was the first person in history to explicitly use this term and to develop the concept.[20] He speaks of 'the rights of men' in *The Arraignment of Mr. Persecution* (1642), an allegory in which the personification of 'persecution for the cause of conscience' is tried and convicted of thousands of deaths, wars and other evils. Overton's most important book was *An Arrow Against All Tyrants and Tyranny* (1646), which contains the following famous quotation:

> No man has power my right and liberties, and I over no man's. I may be but an individual, enjoy myself and my self-property, and may right myself no more than myself, or presume any further; if I do, I am an encroacher and an invader upon another man's right—to which I have no right.[21]

In *An Appeal to the Free People* (1647), Overton set forth a doctrine of what he called 'our natural human rights and freedoms'. For him, this concept included not only religious and civil liberties but also the right to basic needs such as free education, housing and free trade.[22]

David Stamos credits Overton with presenting 'arguably the first clear expression of human rights as universal, plural, equal, innate, and inalienable'.[23] Baptist theologian Stassen concludes that what Overton wrote 'still fits what most Church denominations have said when they have affirmed human rights'.[24] All this happened more than 50 years before John Locke and the English Enlightenment proposed narrower versions of the idea.

Argumentation

According to Overton, human rights are part of human nature and therefore inalienable: 'No one can deprive someone from his human rights. For as by nature no man may abuse, beat, torment, or afflict himself, so by nature no man may give that power to another, seeing he may not do it to himself.'[25]

His doctrine of human rights was based first on the biblical doctrine that all humans are created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27). Part of the doctrine of creation is the concept of natural law, meaning that as a creature of God man is endowed with a conscience, or an awareness of fundamental notions of good and evil. What the Creator requires of man is, to a certain extent, written in his heart. In Protestantism, especially Calvinism, this has served as a basis for legislation and civil order, since all citizens can and should be held accountable when they infringe the moral law. The Leveller movement and other Protestants went a step further and linked the doctrine of creation to natural *rights*. Overton wrote:

> For by natural birth all men are equally and alike born to like propriety, liberty and freedom; and as we are delivered of God by the hand of nature into his world, everyone with a natural innate freedom and propriety—as it were writ in the table of every man's heart, never to be obliterated—even so are we to live, everyone equally and alike to enjoy his birth right and privilege; even all whereof God by nature has made him free.[26]

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[20] Stassen, *Just Peacemaking*, 148, 153; David N. Stamos, *Myth of Universal Human Rights: Its Origin, History, and Explanation, along with a More Humane Way* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 155.

[21] Richard Overton, *An Arrow Against All Tyrants and Tyranny,* par. 55.

[22] Glen Harold Stassen, 'What Baptists Need to Know about Their Human-Rights Heritage', presentation at the annual gathering of the Baptist World Alliance, Santiago, Chile, 2012.

[23] Stamos, *Myth of Universal Rights*, 156.

[24] Stassen, 'What Baptists Need to Know'.

[25] *An Appeal to the Free People*, quoted by Stamos, *Myth of Universal Rights*, 156.

[26] *An Appeal to the Free People*, quoted by Stamos, *Myth of Universal Rights*, 156.

In the words of William Haller, the well-known historian of Puritanism and one of the few scholars to pay adequate attention to Overton and his contemporaries, 'The task of turning the statement of the law of nature into a ringing declaration of the rights of man fell to Richard Overton.'[27]

Second, Overton based his idea of human rights on the doctrine of salvation, stating that since Jesus Christ died for all humankind, no one should be prevented or discouraged from responding to the offer of salvation. This argument parallels that put forward by Thomas Helwys and other early Baptists.

Third, Overton appealed to the example of Jesus and the moral teaching of the New Testament. 'Jesus made disciples by teaching, not by coercion', so Christian magistrates should refrain from using force in matters of religious persuasion. Overton also referred to Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds that grow up side by side (Mt 13:24–30) to conclude that those who are considered 'weeds' should not be uprooted by force and violence.

Roger Williams

Whereas Helwys and Overton belonged to the General Baptists and had an Arminian theological outlook, Roger Williams (1603–1683) belonged to the Particular Baptists, whose theological framework was Calvinistic. In 1630, he sailed to the colony of Massachusetts Bay, where he hoped to find the religious freedom that was so lacking in Europe. He seems to have been influenced by Overton, since the two corresponded for many years.

The Puritans who had founded Massachusetts aspired to fuse political and religious authority. Roger Williams was different. He objected to taking land from Native Americans, and he insisted on separation from the Church of England and from all rituals inherited from it. He also disliked the way in which these beliefs were enforced by a government that combined religious and political authority into one.

Williams held meetings in his home to spread his opinions. For this, he was forced to leave Massachusetts. In 1636, Williams and his companions bought land from the indigenous Indian population and founded the city of Providence, which became the centre of the colony of Rhode Island. In 1638, he and others founded the first Baptist church in what would become the United States.

Williams took care to build a strong architecture of free thinking in the colony of Rhode Island. Thanks to his influential friends in London, he obtained a royal charter for the colony. The two basic principles inscribed in the charter that distinguished Rhode Island from the other colonies, and from any other country at that time, were the freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state. In adopting these principles, Williams accepted religious plurality as a given reality.

Rhode Island became a haven of refuge for groups that were persecuted elsewhere, including Quakers and Jews. The welcome granted to non-Christian Indians in his colony was exceptional in New England. In one of his letters (1670), to a governor of Connecticut, he wrote that 'there is no prudent Christian way of preserving peace in the world but by permission of differing consciences.'

Williams was a prolific writer. His most important work was *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* (1644), in which he affirmed:

> Enforced uniformity confounds civic and religious liberty and the principles of Christianity and civility. No man shall be required to worship or to maintain a worship against his will. … Men's conscience ought in no sort to be violated, urged, or constrained. And whenever men have attempted anything by this violent course, whether openly or by secret means, the issue has been pernicious and ridiculous.

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[27] Quoted by Stassen, *Just Peacemaking,* 141.

To make the point even stronger, he added that 'forced worship stinks in God's nostrils.'

Argumentation

Williams based his case for religious liberty and other universal civil rights on both pragmatic and theological considerations. First, he observed that most wars were caused by religious oppression. (Keep in mind that he lived in a time when Europe was ravaged by religious wars.) Williams contended that if nations would establish the right of everyone to religious liberty, this would take away one of the major reasons to wage wars.

Second, he pointed out, like Overton, that religious pressure is counterproductive. Although its objective is to promote the 'true religion', it incites people to hypocrisy. They will pretend to embrace a certain religion to prevent persecution, even if they are not convinced in their conscience.

Third, Williams cited the example of Jesus Christ who commanded his disciples by teaching and persuasion, not coercion.

All these arguments were widely used by Baptists and dissenters of his time.[28] His main theological argument was the idea of natural law. Here he distinguished himself from his contemporaries by offering a new perspective.[29] Like Calvin, the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay and other Calvinists, Williams argued that all human beings might justly be held to account for transgressing the 'natural' law of 'humanity' and 'civility', whether they had heard of and accepted Christianity or not, for this law is written in their conscience. The same principles are revealed more fully in the Bible. People have a natural right to follow these principles even if this goes against the requirements of certain rulers ('tyrants') who force people to act contrary to this natural law. For Williams, 'the idea of natural rights was not derived specifically from Christian revelation, but from an understanding of human nature itself as rational, self-aware and morally responsible.'[30]

Natural law is the basis of natural rights and freedoms, and therefore also the basis of civil government. The latter should guarantee 'the free exercise and enjoyment of all their civil rights and religious rights'. The problem for Williams was that Calvinists often went well beyond this standard. They claimed that their version of 'orthodox' Christianity was indispensable to the security and prosperity of the state and that, therefore, citizens could be punished not just for violating a moral code commonly accessible to human beings as such but also for transgressing what Calvinists thought were the clear teachings of the Lord Jesus.[31]

Williams found that this approach caused a catastrophe for both religious and civil communities. He affirmed that 'political power, might or authority is not religious, Christian, etc. but natural, human and civil.'[32] He added:

> There is a moral virtue, a moral fidelity, ability and honesty, which other men (beside Church members) are, by good nature and education, by good laws and good examples nourished and trained up in, that civil places of trust and credit need not be monopolised into the hands of Church members (who sometimes are not fitted for

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[28] See Glen Harold Stassen, *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 199.

[29] This summary is based largely on the description in David Little, *Essays on Religion and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 267ff. See also the excellent study by Summer Twiss, 'Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience and Religion as a Natural Right', in *Religion and Public Policy: Human Rights, Conflict, and Ethics*, ed. Summer Twiss, Marian Simion and Rodney Petersen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 21–44.

[30] Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law and Church Law, 1150–1625* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), 76, quoted by Little, *Essays on Religion and Human Rights*, 279.

[31] Little, *Essays on Religion and Human Rights*, 269.

[32] Roger Williams, *Bloody Tenent,* in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 3:398.

them) and all others deprived and despoiled of their natural and civil rights and liberties.[33]

Basic to Williams's approach is the protection of 'the natural and civil rights and liberties of all citizens'.[34] These include property, political participation, legal protection and especially religious freedom or freedom of conscience.

'A wall of separation'

Williams was the first to draw the conclusion that religious liberty implies the non-interference of the state in religious matters: 'The state has no authority to govern the spiritual and Christian commonweal, the flock and church of Christ, to pull down or set up religion, to judge, determine, or punish in spiritual controversies.'[35] He argued that religious and political institutions should respect the 'wall of separation' between them:

> When they [the church] have opened a gap in the hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the Church and the wilderness of the world, God hath ever broke down the wall itself, removed the Candlestick … and made His Garden a wilderness as it is this day. And that therefore, if He will please to restore His garden and Paradise again, it must of necessity be walled in peculiarity unto Himself from the world.[36]

This idea and this expression have found acceptance much later under the title of 'separation of church and state'.

At the same time, Christians should submit to civil governors who are responsible for civil peace and order:

> In all cases wherein civility is wronged in regard to the bodies and goods of any, cases of public safety, peace, and common rights, as well as religiously sanctioned human sacrifices. In all such cases the civil sword is God's sword for suppressing such practices and appearances, including the very principles on which they rest.[37]

In defining the relationship between religious freedom and civil power, Roger Williams was far ahead of his time.

Influence: three historical lines

From the Baptist precursors onwards, we can trace three historical lines of influence.

The first was in England. Helwys and Overton died before they could witness the realization of their ideas. Some four decades later, in 1688, William of Orange, the Protestant prince of the Netherlands, became king. His coronation is known as the Glorious Revolution, because it led to religious tolerance between Catholics and Protestants. In 1689, William issued a Bill of Rights guaranteeing a number of civil rights to all citizens of the kingdom. In the following year, John Locke published his famous *Two Treatises of Government,* in which he argued that 'all government is limited in its powers and exists only by the consent of the governed.' His basic argument was that 'all men are born free.'[38] Clearly, what Locke could now write under peaceful circumstances had already been set forth by others before him in the turmoil of persecution, imprisonment and expulsion.

The second line leads to the American revolution. Roger Williams's plea for religious liberty and civil rights influenced not only John Locke but also other Baptist leaders and

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[33] Williams, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody,* in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams,* 4:365.
[34] Williams, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody,* in *Complete Writings,* 4:414.
[35] Williams, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody,* in *Complete Writings,* 4:366.
[36] Roger Williams, 'Mr. Cotton's Letter Lately Printed, Examined and Answered', in *Complete Writings*, 1:243.
[37] Roger Williams, *The Examiner Defended*, in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 7: 243.
[38] Michal Shortall, *Human Rights and Moral Reasoning: A Comparative Investigation by Way of Three Theorists and Their Respective Traditions of Enquiry: John Finnis, Ronald Dworkin and Jürgen Habermas (*Rome; Gregorian Biblical Book Shop, 2009), 88.

Enlightenment philosophers in America during the 18th century. Although we cannot say with certainty that the founding fathers of the United States directly quoted the Rhode Island Charter when they were discussing the text of the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Constitution, this charter did furnish an example of a colony that could function well and even prosper without an established religion.

The third line can be drawn on the European continent, particularly in France where Enlightenment philosophers spoke out against the oppression of Protestants and advocated for a new political regime that would guarantee fundamental civil rights. They were certainly familiar with the call for religious liberty in the English-speaking world and with Williams specifically. Although they inspired the political changes of the French Revolution in 1789, a Reformed pastor, Paul Rabaut Saint-Etienne, played a key role, first in drafting the Edict of Tolerance issued by King Louis XVI in 1786, and then in drafting the famous Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, adopted by the National Assembly just months after the French Revolution.

Conclusions and a question for today

What can we conclude from the history of early Baptists and their three main representatives, as far as the plea for religious freedom is concerned?

Religions liberty, the 'mother of human rights'. Freedom of conscience has been called the 'mother of human rights', and rightly so, because historically speaking this was the first civil right to be put forward as a universal right for all men, who are created in the image of the one Creator.

The idea of legally guaranteed human civil rights is of religious origin. More specifically, it is of Baptist origin. The early Baptists held the religious conviction that all men are equal in the sight of God and endowed with equal human rights, but they made it into a secular principle for all of society. As Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, Overton, the Levellers and non-conformist Protestants 'expressed, for the first time in history, secular concepts of freedom and equality which break with all traditional forms of social hierarchy. … This is Christianity's chief seventeenth-century achievement.'[39]

'Separation', a religious conviction, became a secular principle. When the Baptists pleaded for the separation of church and state, their purpose was to keep the church free from political interests, but this was at the same time a principle that should limit the power of governors and subject them to universal moral principles. In short, they found a way to turn their religious conviction into a principle that could be applied to the governance of society. In the 18th century, Enlightenment philosophers formulated the same principle, but they gave it a secular, rational basis. It would be interesting to consider to what extent they were inspired by the leaders of persecuted Protestant minorities as they advocated for the separation of political power and religious institutions. As far as I know, this question has not attracted much historical research.

A foundational value for a plural society—not pluralism. Helwys, Overton, Williams and their fellow advocates for religious liberty were the first to fully accept the *fact* of a plural society. This is not the same as pluralism, i.e. recognizing multiple different views as equally true. Differences in theology and church practice really did matter to them. They did not accept other religions as viable ways to salvation. They believed in proclaiming God's word and calling people to conversion. But they were persuaded that ecclesiastical and political rulers should refrain from enforcing uniformity. People of other religious persuasions should have the same rights as we have. This principle enables a plural society to live in peace.

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[39] Alisdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 1998 edition, 144.

What will happen when the religious foundations are lost? The preceding conclusion leads me to a final remark. What will happen to human rights when the religious foundations are lost out of sight or denied? Can there be another foundation for human dignity that does not take religious views into account? What will happen in the long run when a secularist worldview takes over? Can such a worldview safeguard respect for the sacred and for human life in all its stages? We already see the tendency in a secularist worldview to make human rights a slogan for the individual freedom to do what you want, without being bothered by others. Is such an individualist ethic sustainable? What philosophical basis can safeguard human dignity and human rights, if it is devoid of any transcendent divine reality? Will the idea of universal rights not fall victim to pluralism and relativism under which every culture, every country or even every individual can formulate his or her version of these rights?

Today, the question of religious or non-religious foundations of human rights is being widely discussed. We need to recall the historical roots of human rights and listen to our precursors in order to remain connected with the biblical values that were their source of inspiration, especially the biblical view of man. They remain a solid foundation and the safest guide for the future.