

Editorial

Church and State relations have always been a part of the Baptist story. The question ‘How to live true a Christian witness in the existing cultural and political realities?’ has accompanied Baptist identity over centuries, since the time of Smyth and Helwys. And it is not only a question for Baptists, but for all Christians. Sometimes it has helped to call for action. Sometimes it has led believers towards radical separation from the state, and sometimes it has been interpreted in a way that has prompted a movement towards closer cooperation, even to the verge of testing the church’s loyalty to Jesus Christ. And — to use a historical example — even in the former Soviet Union, which was an openly atheistic state, where churches were forced to withdraw from many areas of society, this multi-faceted issue of what is the Christian response or prophetic witness in front of earthly powers did not fully fade away. On the contrary, in some areas it was even intensified, such as in the theology and practice of underground churches.

This issue of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies* is dedicated to this old-new topic, exploring some classical patterns and bringing into discussion fresh perspectives. The articles take into account different contexts where church and state themes have been played out. As the Christian church lives in the midst of change, new challenges emerge, or rather, old challenges in new situations.

This volume could be conceived of as falling into three sub-sections. Firstly, three articles focus on general themes, such as issues of the separation of church and state, Baptist contribution to the development of the concept and practice of human rights, and secularism as an environment for religious freedom. The next three articles bring into the reader’s awareness the historical context. An example from early church history demonstrates that the Donatist’s doctrine of the separation of church and state was an expedient guideline rather than a radical principle. This raises a wider question: In what ways are convictions and practices actually linked? The following articles give additional material for thought, taking the reader into the nineteenth century, when in two different European countries, Norway and Ireland, the Baptists reacted to legislative developments. The last three articles in this issue of *JEBS* bring into discussion biblical and theological aspects: Where does or should obedience to earthly powers end? What are the relationships, if any, between biblical narratives and present-day conceptions of nationalism? Can believers’ communities learn other patterns of relating to the world than the gathered — and separated — way of being a church? It is almost symbolic that the last article in this volume rings a ‘missional bell’, reminding that discussion around relations of church and

the world cannot be detached from other topics, such as ecclesiology, worship and mission.

The next paragraphs of this editorial introduce the articles individually, taking a closer look at each. Uwe Swarat examines basic models and key concepts through the centuries, describing the Eastern Church model of the established church, the Roman Catholic model of political theocracy, the Lutheran doctrine of the two regiments, the Reformed Christocratic model and the Anabaptist model — and finally, the Baptist model, ‘which emphasises separation of church and state, but permits Christians to take on civil roles in society’. This survey offers a helpful axis of coordination where a reader may locate additional ideas and examples that emerge on later pages. Although pointing out other approaches, such as the Anabaptist reservations towards political involvement, Swarat prefers the Lutheran pattern as a platform for a conversation about how to be part of political–social structures, and he expresses conviction that this starting point enables Baptists to act ‘without authorising their politics religiously or politicising their faith’. Tony Peck highlights in his article that ‘Baptists have embraced a concern for human rights’, especially as an idea which guarantees religious freedom for all. The author refers back to historical examples and instances, but the main concern is that numerous violations of human rights and religious freedom are happening in our contemporary world. What should be a Baptist response to this situation? Do Baptists have historical heritage on which to build their present actions and witness? Two illustrations, enhancing the discussion, are specifically underlined: the Baptist contribution in the making and interpretation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the theology and prophetic witness of Martin Luther King Jr. The article brings the discussion into recent context, throwing light on both the scope and content of the notions ‘universal human rights’ and ‘religious freedom for all’. In the third article in this volume, ‘Christianity and Secularism: Prospects and Possibilities’, by Nigel Wright, a large panorama of secularism unfolds. Many Christians perceive ‘secularism’ as a negative tendency of the marginalisation of the Christian Church in society. Wright, however, argues that secular society forms an environment where the free churches find an opportunity to practice a non-coercive religion. In this environment, the state guarantees religious liberty for all. Nevertheless, developing a typology by which — in broad terms — the churches and social reality might be understood, Wright makes a distinction between ‘hard’ or ‘programmatically’ secularism and ‘soft’ or ‘procedural’ secularism. It is the latter that has potential to keep ‘the ring open as a non-sectarian and constructive arbiter for all productive religious contributions’. Paradoxical as it may sound, it is in the interest of churches to encourage ‘hospitable’ secularism as a civic strategy; and this is a soil

where the non-coercive model of being a church, committed to Christian worship and mission, can grow.

In the following three writings, an historical lens is used to investigate the topic. Tarmo Toom describes the understanding of the separation of church and state among the Donatists in the fourth century, and he reaches the conclusion that this teaching, in this controversial group, hardly ever functioned ‘as an absolute principle’, but rather as an ‘expedient doctrine’. The article reveals an intriguing contradiction between the evolving Donatist convictions of the separation of church and state, and their actual practice. Toom’s article, as a kind of historical mirror, offers for the present-day Christian church well-researched material for comparative self-evaluation. History becomes a conversation partner for today. The next article, by Gabriel Stephen, jumps over ‘a time gap’ into the end of the nineteenth century (1877–1891), and discusses how the Norwegian Baptist movement made their voice heard in the discourse on religious freedom in the conformist Lutheran state-church context. The article centres on Baptist criticism of the Dissenter Law, introduced in 1845, as the believers realised that the Law could not alleviate or eliminate disguised discriminatory tendencies towards minority religious communities. In addition, the Law implied that religious liberty was a concession, not an inherent right. The Baptist critical reaction was not limited to dissatisfaction in their inner circles: they became involved in civil disobedience, baptising younger persons than the Law allowed, and they corresponded with the top government leadership of the country to argue their case. Their efforts contributed to a revision of the Dissenter Law in 1891. The third article in this historical section, written by David Luke, illuminates Irish Baptists’ response to the Second Home Rule Bill, in 1893. Even if ‘Irish Baptists have historically adopted the view that religion and politics should not be mixed’ the political movement advocating Irish self-government within the UK, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, changed this practice — at least for a while. Baptists shared concerns with other Protestants that these developments, and passing the Bill, might strengthen the positions of the Catholic majority and limit or even crush the religious and civil liberties of the Protestant minority. Protestants, including Baptists, were ‘providing a religious rationale for resisting Home Rule’. The article points out the complexity of practising Baptist principles in the midst of political turmoil. It remains for further reflection why Irish Baptists lost interest in political engagement immediately after the Second Home Rule Bill was defeated in the House of Lords.

The last articles in this issue of *JEBS* use theological and biblical tools rather than historical. Joshua Searle locates the discussion into the context of the ongoing legacy of the Soviet system. Post-Soviet authoritarianism poses

challenges to believers' churches. Fear tends to hinder Christians from talking about 'social responsibility, justice, truth, freedom, solidarity or the transformation of society', and shapes a pseudo-theological justification for passivity. The article, nevertheless, emphasises, with reference to the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity and its aftermath, that Slavic believers have been 'led to the conviction that the church is called to engage with society'. But how and to what measure? And how to avoid a road towards 'the blasphemous deification of the state'? What steps would help post-Soviet evangelicals to move from the emphasis on personal salvation towards being agents of social transformation? Some answers, the author posits, could be found from Baptist and Anabaptist traditions. Helen Paynter gives voice to biblical theology, exploring questions which emerge when nationalistic ideology appears to be supported by biblical narrative. The author describes elements of ethnic nationalism, mapping the far-right 'terrain', and inquires if the scriptures, especially the Old Testament texts, actually endorse such ideology or not. The conclusion is that there is nothing in biblical themes that offers genuine support for ethnic nationalism. The 'physical categories of land and blood-line' — potentially nationalistic motives — have now, in the light of the work of Jesus Christ, been concretised into eschatological and spiritual categories. They are not other-worldly categories, but they are no longer in force, pending the eschaton. 'The misapplication of biblical tropes and themes may — ironically — give us purchase to address a group which would otherwise be outside our orbit'. Despite the dangers of far-right movements, Baptists are invited to speak a counter-narrative of inclusion and peaceableness. The concluding essay in this journal issue, in a way continuing from where the previous article ended, explores dimensions of mission. Mark Ord questions a widespread view that relations between the church and the world should be described with images of clear demarcation and substantial boundary between the two, and he challenges the separation that this approach seems to imply. Within this framework of thought, often perceived as part of Baptist identity, mission becomes a 'boundary crossing' transmission from one realm to another: delivering a message or servicing a need. The article probes another approach — that of 'two-way relations' between the church and the world — and is looking for an authentic faith that 'converts and transforms in both directions'. Ord argues, bringing into discussion the element of worship and sacramental theology, that formation is not linear, it works both ways: it is not only that church members deliver a good message for the world, the believers' communities, too, are shaped by their members' participation in the world. Christians are not only teaching others how to be disciples, but they are learning as well. The relationships between the church and the world are complex, and the borders are porous.

Church and state relations, and the connected aspects of religious freedom and human rights, political developments and secularism, continue to challenge Christian churches, theologically and practically. One may even say that Baptists or baptistic churches, because of their inherent identity markers which call for a witnessing discipleship in the world, are especially ‘obliged’ to deal with these topics while finding their way in existing cultures, and sometimes living under the shadow of majority churches or dominant religions. It requires courage of interpretation and hermeneutical efforts to probe into the questions of how to live a missional life — in this world, and still not from this world. Both diachronic and synchronic approaches, learning from historical developments and from the present-day realities, and crossing denominational and geographical borders while deepening the discussion, are relevant for this task. There are no watertight patterns, and Christian meaningful responses to the world — or culture or state or ideologies or politics, if a reader prefers more specific terms — are often not ready-made. And, as we are reminded, besides seeking for a response there is an important task of listening... This issue of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies* offers some insights and ideas for this ongoing process.

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