

# Baptists and Human Rights<sup>1</sup>

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This article was written as a response to the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 50th Anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King Jr. It explores Baptist perspectives on human rights in historical, theological and contemporary contexts. It examines how the foundational commitment of Baptists to religious freedom for all inevitably has wider implications for human rights as a whole, a link which Baptists have not always made, sometimes to their cost. The scope, content and source of human rights are explored, and in each of these aspects Baptists have much to contribute, and at the same time have found much that is deeply challenging to their theology and practice. In the contemporary world, Baptists continue to see the foundation of human rights as located in the sovereignty of God rather than being foundational in themselves. Following Michael Westmoreland-White, it is suggested that Baptists see talk of human rights as a *lingua franca* rather than as a form of *esperanto*. This leaves open the possibility that Baptists can contribute to public discourse by searching for common agreement on the *application* of human rights in the contemporary world with those whose foundational moral vision may be different from their own.

## Keywords

Baptists; human rights; religious freedom

## Introduction

From their own historical experience, and as part of those core convictions that form their identity, Baptists have embraced a concern for human rights, especially from the starting point of religious freedom for all. This paper seeks to make a Baptist contribution to the thinking and reflection around the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, arguably the greatest Baptist exponent of, and activist for, human rights.

In September 2017 I stood near the conflict line between eastern Ukraine and the territories occupied by Russian-backed forces, known as the 'People's Republics' of Luhansk and Donetsk. These two regions have been

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was first given as part of the lecture series, 'Human Rights and Social Justice: Commemorating the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 50th Anniversary of the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King Jr', given at the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture, Regents Park College, Oxford, UK, on 26 November 2018.

the subject of an ongoing violent conflict between Russia and Ukraine in which 10,000 Ukrainians have already lost their lives, and about 1.5 million men and women have become IDPs (Internally Displaced People). Together with other European and world Baptist leaders, I stood next to a memorial made out of the Russian shells that have rained down on that town in the so-called ‘grey’ or ‘ceasefire’ zone.

As I looked at the wall of a bombed-out block of flats I saw a beautifully drawn face of a popular local teacher, who in her class taught pupils who now fight on opposite sides of this conflict. Her picture is a symbol of hoped-for reconciliation as she looks out towards the conflict zone. I looked with her, and saw the border, the conflict line. Beyond, a red danger sign: the forests are mined. Inside the Occupied Territories life is even worse, with increased poverty, little work, and people still being killed in the conflict. We have 85 Baptist church communities in the two Occupied Zones and we try to support them and their communities as best we can.

In one of our churches in the grey zone we met a number of women — *babushkas* — who told us of their constant fear of shells being fired at their village from inside the Occupied Zone, usually fifteen minutes after the International Ceasefire Monitoring office closes for the day. They told us that they could no longer go to the forest to collect wood to heat their homes because the whole area is heavily mined. One of our European Baptist Federation (EBF) aid projects last year was to provide these women with alternative heaters for their homes. ‘How long must this go on?’ they asked us.

A week before our visit, armed militia entered one of our Baptist churches in the occupied territory of Luhansk and confiscated the building and its contents. Since our visit to eastern Ukraine, a law has been passed in the Luhansk territory that makes all churches, mosques and religious groups illegal, except those of the Russian Orthodox Church. No meetings of more than five people will be permitted in homes. A similar law is planned for the Donetsk territory.

It is difficult to believe these numerous violations of human rights and religious freedom are happening in 2018, and a conflict that at its heart is between two avowedly Christian nations. I could, of course, have spoken about other parts of our EBF region as well, especially Syria and Iraq. In forming our response to human rights challenges, we always have in our minds the real suffering of real people and how we as Baptists and, indeed, all people of goodwill, can be most effective in helping them.

## **Partnership**

As European Baptists we do not, of course, address violations of human rights alone. The European Baptist Federation is a member of the Conference of European Churches with its human rights office in Brussels.<sup>2</sup> We are a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in association with the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe, an intergovernmental organisation that has human rights as one of its key priorities; and together with the Baptist World Alliance, we have a high-level entry point to the United Nations in New York, in Vienna and, especially the human rights office in Geneva.

In recent years the EBF has established a small team of three people who can research abuses of religious freedom and human rights and who also travel regularly to Geneva to contribute the experience of Baptist communities on the ground to the Universal Periodic Reviews on human rights the UN carries out on different nations. In recent times, we have done this for Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, based on our own visits there, and we are also currently finding ways to raise the human rights situation in eastern Ukraine.

As European and British Baptists we are together a ‘stakeholder’ in the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Religious Freedom, where, of course, we find that presenting issues of religious freedom also involves other abuses of human rights, for example among the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar.<sup>3</sup>

Working in partnership with and being connected to others is therefore a crucial part of what we do. And indeed, we find many common points of conviction and concern about human rights with both religious and secular bodies. But the question I have set myself to answer in this paper is ‘What do we Baptists especially, if not uniquely, bring to the table from our history and our identity? What is our Baptist contribution to the wider debate and concern about the defence of human rights in our world today?’

Let me now acknowledge the two anniversaries that provided the impetus for the lecture series at which this paper was first presented.

## **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

An earlier lecture in the series described something of the twists and turns of the story of the forming of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in

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<sup>2</sup> See Elizabeta Kitanovic, ed, *European Churches Engaging in Human Rights* (Brussels: Conference of European Churches, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/> [accessed 20 October 2018].

1948,<sup>4</sup> and undoubtedly also the significant role played by the churches and especially by the Lutheran, Frederick Nolde.

Baptists had been at the meeting of the UN in San Francisco in 1945 that first discussed the wording of the UN Charter. They represented what was known as the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty in the USA, formed in 1939 to represent all the four main Baptist denominations in the USA at that time, north and south, black and white. The chairperson of that committee, J M Dawson, narrated in his memoirs the sense of expectancy he experienced:

To that meeting I carried a hundred thousand petitions from Baptists, North and South, white and Negroes, asking that the Charter to be adopted would include guarantee of full religious liberty for every human being.<sup>5</sup>

In this particular concern the Baptists were to be disappointed because there is no specific mention of religious freedom in the Charter. Dawson later addressed the Baptist World Congress in Copenhagen in 1947 on the progress towards the Declaration of Human Rights. As is well known, the US Protestant Churches, including some American (Northern) Baptists under the leadership of Lutheran, Frederick Nolde, sought to argue for a necessary link between religious freedom and all other freedoms; or as the conclusion of John Nurser's definitive account of the significant role of the churches in the process towards the Declaration has it, 'Faith and Human Rights need each other'.<sup>6</sup>

Dawson's hope expressed to the Baptist World Congress that the United Nations 'inaugurate a new birth of religious freedom around the world' was realised, at least in aspiration, in Article 18 on religious freedom. Its eventual adoption was helped by both Eleanor Roosevelt and the Ahmadi Muslim, Sir Mohammed Zafrullah Khan, foreign minister of the newly independent Republic of Pakistan. He crucially expressed his support for the Article in its entirety, including the clause referring to the right to change one's religion.<sup>7</sup>

Here we have the first significant theme when thinking about Baptists and human rights. From their early history Baptists have begun with an emphasis on religious freedom for all, and have tended to see human rights as a whole through that lens. As I will explore later, this perspective has had its strengths, but where their own religious freedom has been 'exchanged'

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<sup>4</sup> Dr Peter Petkoff, 'Religious Voices and the Making of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights', Lecture, Regent's Park College, Oxford, 12 November 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in David F. D'Amico, 'Baptists and Human Rights', *The Center for Baptist Studies*, <http://www.centerforbaptiststudies.org/hotissues/baptistshumanrights.htm> [accessed 16 October 2018].

<sup>6</sup> John Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations: Christian Churches and Human Rights* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), pp. 172-180.

<sup>7</sup> Nurser, *For All Peoples*, p. 167.

for tacit support for abuses of other human rights it has led Baptists to some very difficult places.

## **Martin Luther King Jr**

We now turn to the other anniversary, that of the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King Jr. He is of course a Baptist of whom all Baptists can be proud, though this was not always true in his lifetime, especially in the USA.

On the morning of 16 August 1964, Dr King addressed the European Baptist Federation Congress meeting in Amsterdam. One of the treasures in our EBF archive is a film of that occasion, including the sermon he preached.<sup>8</sup>

There is some evidence that in accepting the invitation to Europe (when, by the way, he visited both West and East Germany) he and his aides were aware that he might have a more sympathetic hearing among European Baptists as a whole than among Baptists in the USA.

Though obviously weary, he preached with his customary eloquence, and powerful use of metaphor, on Jesus's parable of the man who knocks on the door at midnight asking for bread (Luke 11: 5-8). He spoke of the 'midnight' of the world's darkness, of those who knock on the door of the church looking for answers, and even if they do not seem to receive them immediately, eventually sensing that midnight gives way to the dawn, and that there is hope in the Christian Gospel.

In his preaching, writing and campaigning for human rights, Martin Luther King drew especially on the prophetic witness of the Old Testament, the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere, as well as on the non-violent action tradition of Gandhi, to articulate the suffering and injustice of his African-American community denied their full civil and political and economic rights.

In this he followed another Baptist tradition, perhaps not always so prevalent among us, of campaigning for justice and freedom for the oppressed. This is seen, for example, in the Baptist involvement in England and Jamaica at the forefront of finally ending slavery in the British Empire in the early nineteenth century. On the other hand, the split between the Northern and Southern Baptists of the USA that happened about the same time was over the question of defending or abolishing the institution of

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<sup>8</sup> The entire sermon can be viewed at <https://anderetijden.nl/artikel/673/Martin-Luther-King-preekte-in-1964-in-Amsterdam> [accessed 15 November 2018].

slavery. However, several of the earlier Baptist pioneers in America showed particular concern for the rights of American Indians and American blacks.<sup>9</sup>

A concern for freedom from slavery continues today with, for instance, the formation in 2005 of the European Baptist Federation Anti-Human Trafficking Project. It works with others to encourage both measures to prevent the trafficking of women and girls, often from eastern to western Europe, and projects such as shelters that care for the victims. It is a small contribution in the continuing of this Baptist concern for the care of those Jesus called ‘the least of these’ in terms of freedom and justice for the downtrodden and oppressed.<sup>10</sup>

So these two encounters of Baptists with the two anniversaries remind us of the dominant tradition among Baptists (at their best, and we must also confess our failures in this regard) to stand for religious freedom for all, and also of being at the forefront of justice for the oppressed, the most outstanding example of which is Martin Luther King Jr. A concern for human rights as a whole brings these two aspects together.

## **Baptist Theological Reflection on Human Rights**

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration, some Baptists have sought to articulate a more integrated theology of human rights and its relationship to that primary Baptist concern for religious freedom for all. These include James E Wood,<sup>11</sup> who succeeded Dawson as the Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee in the USA, and also Thorwald Lorenzen,<sup>12</sup> Glen Stassen,<sup>13</sup> Neville Callam,<sup>14</sup> and Paul Fiddes.<sup>15</sup> Writing in 1986, James Wood declared that

there has never been a greater need for Baptists to demonstrate their genuine and unequivocal commitment to human rights and their profound concern for human values within the social and political structures of today’s world. In this, Baptists can claim to possess no special competence, no superior wisdom, and no ready-made formula for the implementation of a programme of human rights at home

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<sup>9</sup> James E. Wood, ‘Baptists and Human Rights’, in *Faith Life and Witness: The Papers of the Study and Research Division of the Baptist World Alliance 1986-1990*, ed. by William Brackney and Ruby Burke (Birmingham AL: Samford University Press, 1990), pp. 257-267.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.ebf.org/anti-trafficking-materials> for EBF Resources [accessed 20 November 2018].

<sup>11</sup> James E. Wood, *Baptists and Human Rights* (Macleans, VA: Baptist World Alliance, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Thorwald Lorenzen, ‘Towards a Theology of Human Rights’, *Review and Expositor* 97 (2000): 49-65.

<sup>13</sup> Glen Stassen, *Just Peacemaking* (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1992), especially Chapter 6; and, *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), pp. 64-70.

<sup>14</sup> Neville Callam, ‘Human Rights and the Baptist World Alliance’, in *Pursuing Unity, Defending Rights: The Baptist World Alliance at Work* (Falls Church VA: Baptist World Alliance, 2010), pp. 97-129.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Fiddes, ‘Theological and Biblical Foundations for Human Rights’, and ‘Religious Rights and Principles within the Baptist Tradition’, unpublished papers. I am grateful to Professor Fiddes for giving me sight of these.

or abroad. Nevertheless, impelled by a biblical faith, Baptists must now or in the future, identify themselves with the cause of human rights for all persons, everywhere.<sup>16</sup>

The European Baptist Federation is one of six regional bodies of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA). In its Annual Gatherings and Congresses the BWA has made important declarations about individual human rights in the context of war and racism; and has expressed support for the rights of women and children, social and economic rights, as well as religious freedom. There is an annual award for a Baptist who has made an outstanding contribution to human rights, and past recipients include former US President, Jimmy Carter.

On human rights as a whole, the BWA declared the following in its Congress in Stockholm in 1975:

We believe that God has made humankind in his own image and that he endows us with certain human rights which Christians are obliged to affirm, defend, and extend: the right to necessities of life includes the rights of all persons to have access to life, liberty, food, clothing, shelter, health, education, the right to work, and the pursuit of happiness including a quality of life that allows adequate development of human potentialities.<sup>17</sup>

Paul Fiddes has noted that from the eighteenth century onwards, Baptists tended to adopt the language of ‘natural’ or ‘inalienable’ rights, particularly from the French and American Revolutions, without much critical reflection on them. But now from these official BWA statements there is what he calls a ‘firmer theological grounding’ that natural and inalienable rights are endowed *through the making of human beings in the image of God* (emphasis mine).<sup>18</sup>

Five years later, at the next BWA Congress, a Declaration on Human Rights was adopted which made this even clearer.

Human rights are derived from God – from his nature, his creation and his commands. Concern for human rights is at the heart of the Christian faith. Every major doctrine is related to human rights beginning with the biblical revelation of God.<sup>19</sup>

This picks up a very contemporary concern on the part of Baptists and other Christians about the way in which human rights seem to have become detached from a clear moral foundation and are often now seen as ‘foundational’ themselves. This is expressed by Thorwald Lorenzen, who for many years taught at the International Baptist Theological Seminary at

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<sup>16</sup> Wood, ‘Baptists and Human Rights’, p. 265.

<sup>17</sup> Cited by Fiddes, ‘Religious Rights and Principles.’

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> ‘Declaration on Human Rights’, in *Celebrating Christ’s Presence Through the Spirit: Official Report of the Fourteenth Congress 1980*, ed. by Cyril Bryant and Ruby Burke (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1981), p. 246.

Rüschlikon, Switzerland, in his essay ‘Towards a Theology of Human Rights’. He says:

The problem and the challenge is clear; unless a universally moral foundation for human rights is discovered and agreed upon, human rights will increasingly be emptied of their validity and authority, and they will continue to be functionalised to serve national economic, and other ideological interests [...] It belongs to our task to argue that any understanding of the *humanum* that brackets out the need for a relationship with God is deficient.<sup>20</sup>

I will return later to the challenge that he poses here.

Neville Callam, the General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance from 2007 to 2017, whilst acknowledging that the Baptist understanding of human rights ‘fits well into, and is continuous with, the general human rights theory that has been advanced within the wider ecclesial community’, nevertheless sums up what he terms the ‘characteristic peculiarities’ of Baptists. Among those he cites are the following two:

- the assertion of the primacy of religious liberty, such that other human rights may be said to be implied by the right of religious liberty;
- a biblically inspired vision in which creation, redemption and covenant as dimensions of God’s dealings with humankind are highly significant for human rights understanding.<sup>21</sup>

From all this we begin to see the contours of the way in which Baptists have reflected on human rights. Baptists have prioritised a concern for religious freedom, usually but not always religious freedom for all, and have seen other rights as derivative from and dependent on it. Some of them at least have sought to articulate a clear biblical and theological basis and vision for human rights.

So, in making a Baptist contribution to the contemporary debate about human rights, what is it from our own tradition and identity that we draw on?

## Historical Perspective

First of all, we have a unique historical perspective. In 1612, the first Baptist leader in England, Thomas Helwys, made his famous plea for religious freedom for all, including for those of the Jewish and Muslim faiths, as well as for those he termed ‘heretics’. So far as we know, Helwys was the first person to articulate religious freedom for all in the English language. It was an idea before its time that came to flower in the period of the Commonwealth thirty years later, long after Helwys’s lonely death in Newgate Prison.

<sup>20</sup> Lorenzen, ‘Towards a Theology’, p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> Callam, ‘Human Rights and the Baptist World Alliance’, p. 116.

In his account of the early English Baptists, Stephen Wright makes the perceptive remark that this commitment had wider implications for the ordering of society. This was especially true if, as Helwys allowed, Baptists could become magistrates, and presumably use that position to oppose compulsion in religion and thus also stand in the defence of other freedoms. Wright concludes that ‘this amounted to a theoretical foundation for political activism’ — and indeed it remained ‘theoretical’ for the next thirty years.<sup>22</sup>

But in the 1640s, at the time of the Commonwealth, came the General Baptist and Leveller, Richard Overton, who as a young man had been part of the remaining Baptist–Mennonite congregation in Amsterdam following the return to England of Thomas Helwys to found the first Baptist church in London. In a very different religious and political context Overton explored the implications of Helwys’s view of religious freedom for all in his pamphlet ‘An Appeal to the Free people’. To this he attached a Draft Bill of Rights. Here religious and civil liberty belong together; certainly freedom from coercion of religion, but also freedom of the press (Overton was a printer and publisher). He also added the right not to be placed under arbitrary arrest or tortured, and went on to state the right to life, including the basic needs of life: free education of all, housing, care for orphans, widows, the old, and the disabled. Alongside these were the right of the poor to maintain their portion of land and not be imprisoned for debt, the right to dignity in community, a participation in a church of one’s choice, participating in government regardless of beliefs, and the right to petition parliament.

Glen Stassen describes Overton’s ‘Appeal’ as ‘the first comprehensive doctrine of human rights’. This view was supported by, for instance, Ernst Troeltsch and others who have pointed to the radical English puritan movements as the origins of modern human rights.<sup>23</sup>

So, as the seventeenth century unfolded, we see that Baptists were at the forefront of arguing for religious freedom for all and also extending this freedom into other areas of life.

In the centuries that followed, especially from the early nineteenth century onwards, Baptists in Europe nearly all began as persecuted minorities themselves, deprived of their religious and human rights by an alliance of government and state church or state religion. Examples would include Czarist persecution of Russian Baptists and the severe persecution of Romanian Baptists in the 1920s.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists, 1603-1649* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), p. 74.

<sup>23</sup> Stassen, *A Thicker Jesus*, pp. 67-70.

<sup>24</sup> Tony Peck, ‘Against the Tide: Episodes Highlighting the Situation of Religious Freedom for Baptists in Central and Eastern Europe’ in *Baptists and the World: Renewing the Vision*, ed. by John H.Y. Briggs and Anthony R. Cross (Oxford: Regents Park College, 2011), pp. 105-111.

And indeed, in a few countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia it is still the case today that Baptists are subject to harassment, fines, the refusal to allow them to legally register their churches, and even the imprisonment of their pastors.

Therefore, from our more than four-hundred-year history we know what it is like to suffer not just a denial of our religious freedom, but the loss of other rights as well.

## **Baptists and the Scope of Human Rights**

From this historical perspective we have a conviction about the scope of human rights. Thomas Helwys argued for *universal* religious freedom, as some continental Anabaptists had argued before him, and he may well have had contact with some of them in his time with John Smyth in Amsterdam.

So in his book ‘The Mystery of Iniquity’,<sup>25</sup> where he severely castigates every Christian tradition but his own, Helwys nevertheless argues for religious freedom for all and names the other two Abrahamic faiths, as well as those who might be considered in some way ‘heretical’, as also having the right to religious freedom.

In the years that followed, Baptists were not sure about this universal appeal and sought to modify or put restrictions on it. For instance, the particular Baptist Confession of 1677 restricted liberty to all opinions that were ‘not contrary to Scripture’. Others wanted to draw the boundaries to exclude Roman Catholics. They were probably not at all convinced about religious freedom for Jews and Muslims.

The ‘universal’ appeal of Helwys tended to be submerged in the centuries that followed him but re-emerged in the twentieth century, in the era of a concern for an end to the horror of world war and for the declaring of universal human rights as a key part of building the peace.

And indeed, whilst Helwys spoke to a very different society than our own, his words speak well into our contemporary world. Thus, the commitment that Baptists bring from their tradition to religious freedom for all and not just for themselves, is something that has brought us recognition and respect, and importantly, something that transcends narrow ecclesiastical or nationalist concerns. So, for example, in its first major report published in 2017 on the state of religious freedom around the world, the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief includes this reference:

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity (1611/1612)*, Classics of Religious Liberty 1, ed. and introduced by Richard Groves (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998).

It took the courage of people like Thomas Helwys, a Baptist minister who publicly advocated religious liberty at a time when to hold such views could be dangerous, to help change English practice [...] Helwys was the first person to outline in the English language what we now know as Article 18.<sup>26</sup>

And at the launch of that Report in the Speakers' House in Westminster, which I attended, Lord Ahmad, an Ahmadiyya Muslim and Minister of State at the Foreign Office, went out of his way to commend the witness of Thomas Helwys as foundational and inspirational for our approach to human rights and religious freedom today. (Since then, Lord Ahmad has been appointed the very first UK Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief.)

But it has to be said that for Baptists, the appeal to universal religious freedom and universal human rights still has its challenges. I discovered this at the Baptist World Alliance Annual Gathering in Zurich earlier this year (2018), when I mentioned the on-going legacy of Helwys in terms of religious freedom for all in our world today. I was sharply rebuked by the Nigerian Delegation who could not accept that we should hold religious freedom for all when there is such a vicious, violent, and tragic conflict with Boko Haram in their own country. They went on to say that even holding this vision for ourselves in the United Kingdom is somehow to encourage this kind of terrorism.

This demonstrates that in time of conflict, or war, or in the face of the threat of religiously-sponsored terrorism, holding to an ethic of religious freedom for all is much more challenging. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration recognises this with its third clause that states:

Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

Thus, some Baptists in a number of central European countries have supported their governments in erecting fences and walls to prevent Muslim refugees from entering their country, whilst welcoming the trickle of refugees who profess Christianity. I have to say it is rather strange for me to see Baptists quote with approval slogans like 'We are the last barrier of Christian civilisation in Europe!' Although it should be noted that other Baptists in that same region have, however, worked tirelessly for the human and religious rights of all refugees.

In 2016, Russia signed off draconian laws greatly restricting the activity of non-Russian Orthodox religious groups, including Protestants

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<sup>26</sup> Great Britain, UK Government, *From Rhetoric to Reality*, Report of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, (London: Government Publications, 2017), Article 18, p. 16.

such as ourselves, and making the Jehovah's Witnesses completely illegal — all in the name of anti-terrorism. It took courage for Russian Baptists to protest this, specifically citing the situation of the Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>27</sup> This affects not only religious freedom but also the associated rights of free speech, freedom of assembly and association, and freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. I have already indicated how, under Russian influence, the situation of the Jehovah's Witnesses is now being extended to every non-Russian Orthodox religious group in the Occupied Territories of Luhansk and Donetsk that were seized from Ukraine. And at present (November 2018), we are very concerned about the situation in Bulgaria, where despite it being an EU member State and signing up to the European Convention of Human Rights, the government proposes severe restrictions and even the removal of legal status from minority religious groups, again in the name of combating religiously-inspired terrorism. Local Baptists have been in the forefront of opposition to this, and there are recent signs that under that and international pressure the government is softening its stance.<sup>28</sup>

So, navigating such a world as ours with a commitment to universal human rights and the characteristic Baptist commitment to freedom of religion or belief for all, brings many challenges both from inside the Baptist community and outside. Yet despite that, I believe that our continuing commitment to Helwys's radical vision of universal religious freedom and its associated human rights is a precious gift we bring to the table when we engage with others in defending human rights and religious freedom.

## **Baptists and the Content of Human Rights**

We have seen that in the human rights arena Baptists have tended to lead with their commitment to religious freedom for all, but that there have always been Baptists, from Richard Overton onwards, who saw the implications of that and linked it with other freedoms in society and in the world. And in many cases of what appear to be religiously motivated human rights abuses today, religious freedom is almost inevitably linked with the loss of other freedoms. Examples include the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, and Islamic State persecution of both Muslims and Christians in Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, at crucial points it has been important to remind Baptists that they must not be so concerned about their

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<sup>27</sup> The letter from the Russian Baptist Union can be accessed in English at <https://sukofamily.org/an-open-letter-to-vladimir-putin-from-russian-baptists-about-religious-freedom/>. See also the 'Resolutions of the Baptist World Alliance in 2017', <http://bwanet.org/bwa-resolutions-2017> [both accessed on 18 November 2018].

<sup>28</sup> I am happy to report that a few weeks after I gave the original paper in November 2018, the Bulgarian Government withdrew the offending legal clauses of the proposed legislation.

own religious freedom that they are somehow prevented from standing up to other human rights abuses.

One example of this, which has now been well documented by Baptist historians in both England and Germany, is the position of German Baptists in the 1930s and throughout the Second World War. Baptists in Germany had known persecution in the late nineteenth century and discrimination against them and restrictions on their activity from the time of German Unification. After Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, he and Reichsbishop Ludwig Müller reached an accommodation with the Baptists. They were required to merge with the Christian Brethren, and to adopt the 'Fuhrer Principle' in their leadership, with the promise that they would have more freedom than ever before to preach the Gospel and evangelise in Germany. In return they were expected to keep silent about the fate of the Jews or the other dreadful abuses of human rights and dignity taking place in Germany. And that is exactly what happened throughout the whole Nazi period. There was intensive evangelistic activity in Germany's towns and villages on the part of the Baptists, but few examples of resistance to Nazi policies and certainly not from the Baptist Union as a whole.<sup>29</sup>

In 1984 German Baptists made a Statement of Confession to the European Baptist Federation Congress in Hamburg about the stance of German Baptists during this period. It includes these words:

We, the German Baptist Union, are humbled by having been subordinated often to the ideological seduction of that time, in not having shown greater courage in acknowledging truth and justice. We pray to God that we may learn from this part of our history, so that we may be more alert to the ideological temptations of our day.<sup>30</sup>

It is significant to me that this ties in with an observation made by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing in 1939 as he returned home to Germany from the USA to the full horror of what awaited him. He wrote a reflection on his experience of what appeared to be the almost total religious freedom enjoyed in the United States. He makes the point that religious freedom is more than that which a State grants to the churches. On the part of the churches, how they handle whatever freedom they have is crucial; it is possible to be so grateful for your religious freedom that you cease to speak prophetically to your nation. Thus, Bonhoeffer says:

The freedom of the church is not only when it has possibilities [of freedom given to it by the State] but only where the Gospel really and in its own power makes room for itself on earth, even and precisely when so such possibilities are offered

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<sup>29</sup> The best account of this in English is by Bernard Green, *European Baptists and the Third Reich* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2008), especially Chapters 1-3.

<sup>30</sup> Green, *European Baptists*, pp. 232-233.

to it [...] where thanks for institutional freedom must be rendered by the sacrifice of preaching, the church is in chains, even if it believes itself to be free.<sup>31</sup>

This remains a challenge for BapStists in many places, even in the EBF region today, and shows the importance of not placing an exclusive emphasis on one's own religious freedom at the expense of all else. We need to set our Baptist commitment to religious freedom within the context of the whole field of human rights, and where rights appear to clash, we must work with others to resolve the difficulties with an eye to the common good.

## **Baptists and the Source of Human Rights**

My final point with respect to the contribution of Baptists to contemporary human rights has to do with the source of human rights.

Helwys and other early Baptists in the seventeenth century, saw religious and other rights as grounded in a vision of the sovereignty of God and the rule of Christ over the community just as much as the individual. This then relativises and restricts the right of the King or government to determine the consciences and religious preferences of their subjects. In his handwritten preface to the copy of his book addressed to King James 1, Helwys said, 'The King is a mortal man and not God, therefore has no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them and to set spiritual lords over them.'

As we have seen, in the eighteenth century, Baptists tended to take as their starting point for thinking about rights the language of 'natural' or 'inalienable' rights from the French and American Revolutions. But today, in a society dominated by secularism, the challenge posed by Thorwald Lorenzen, as quoted earlier, remains: Can a universally moral foundation for human rights be discovered and agreed upon? And if not, does this not put human rights at the mercy of national, and other ideological interests? Is Lorenzen right to state that 'any understanding of the *humanum* that brackets out the need for a relationship with God is deficient'?

As Christians and as Baptists, I think, I hope, we would thoroughly agree. But in the field of human rights, and when faced with how to tackle the abuse of human rights, we will need to be doing it in partnership with those of other belief systems, religious and otherwise. Contemporary Baptists have been addressing this issue.

In his as yet unpublished paper 'Theological and Biblical Foundations for Human Rights', Paul Fiddes suggests that we can seek common ground

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<sup>31</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Protestantism Without Reformation', in *No Rusty Swords*, ed. by E. Robertson (London, Collins, 1965), pp. 104-105.

with secular approaches in terms of exploring together the common ground of human worth and dignity, together with its associated ideas of love, compassion and forgiveness. Christians will have their own perspectives on these, rooted in such concepts as the sovereignty of God, the image of God and the desire of God, that might be quite close to those of other religions such as Islam. Fiddes goes on to suggest that secular human rights talk and theological understanding can be placed side by side, allowing one to illumine the other, especially in two of the biggest challenges to human rights today: the concern about an excessive individualistic approach that deems human rights to be a personal possession; and the challenge to restate human rights that is not so closely bound to the language of western democracy.

I believe this to be a potentially fruitful approach to this question of a universal basis for human rights. However, in spite of seeking common ground with those who do not see the actions of a Creator God as foundational for human rights, I nevertheless agree with Paul Fiddes' conclusion, that the defence of human rights will always need some concept of the sovereign rule of God and the rights of God.<sup>32</sup>

This remains something of a dilemma and a paradox in working with others who see human rights as foundational in themselves. Perhaps it challenges Christians to theologically explore further and more thoroughly the universal meaning and implications of the *imago dei* with reference to human rights. At any rate, it convinces me that those whose faith does embrace the creator God as the source of human dignity should not abandon that part of the public square concerned with human rights.

Another Baptist who has addressed the question is social ethicist Michael Westmoreland-White from the USA. His view sees human rights not as having a universal *foundation* but a universal *application*. At the same time, he argues, we must recognise the diversity and distinctive voices of different moral traditions and communities that make up a given society and the international community itself. In order to do this, says Westmoreland-White, we should not see human rights language as a kind of *esperanto* that leads to the moral equivalent of a monoculture. But rather human rights should be seen as a *lingua franca*, a trade language, or international diplomatic language, which provides a common way for communities with disparate moral visions to come together to negotiate and agree about what constitutes human rights and their application in a changing world. This is a dynamic process which requires that the language be developed and filled out by participants who will be open to the insights of others who may come

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<sup>32</sup> Fiddes, 'Theological and Biblical Foundations'.

from very different starting points, and also who will be open to themselves being challenged and changed by the experience.<sup>33</sup>

This approach is one in which all faith groups should be able to articulate their convictions with integrity, using the *lingua franca* of human rights to keep engaged in agreeing them and defending them when they are abused, and also one that allows us to raise difficult questions and challenges with each other. The overall aim is to learn from each other and find a common way forward on human rights to which all can contribute.

I have long been convinced that what we need to do is to be present in, and if necessary open up, spaces in our public life nationally and internationally where this *lingua franca* of human rights can be shared and explored as we face common challenges. Recently, I was able to experience this working in a very positive way. For the first time, on behalf of UK and European Baptists, I attended the Stakeholders' Meeting of the group that supports the work of the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group (or APPG) on International Religious Freedom that I mentioned above. Around the big table, together with one of the two Parliamentary Chairs of the APPG (an MP from the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland), were representatives of the Mormons, Open Doors, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the British Humanist Association, the Sikh Community, Muslim Community, Jewish Community, and myself as a Baptist. Baha'i and Hindu representatives sent apologies. We met to agree together on what religious freedom priorities the APPG should raise in the UK Parliament. We came from our very different standpoints but found ourselves with a common concern and common focus that enabled us together to speak about Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, persecuted Christians in the Middle East and persecuted atheists in Bangladesh. I was glad to be at that table.

## Conclusion

I have endeavoured in this paper to suggest something of what Baptists can usefully contribute from their own tradition and theology when seeking a common way forward in human rights, while at the same time allowing themselves to be continually challenged by that tradition and theology. In essence, what we bring is a continuing commitment to the universal scope of human rights; a commitment to see the emphasis on religious freedom as inextricably linked with human rights as a whole; and, to a dialogue with more secular approaches, we bring our convictions that human rights find their source in the sovereignty of God and the rule of Christ. And I have

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Westmoreland-White, 'Setting the Record Straight: Christian Faith, Human Rights and the Enlightenment', *The Annual of the Society of Ethics*, Vol 15 (1995): 75-95.

followed the suggestion that by seeing human rights as a *lingua franca*, we are enabled to speak and to act together to alleviate some of the most challenging situations of suffering of our time.

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