

**The Christian Understanding of Human Rights – Difficult Questions  
CEC Conference – Bad Boll, Germany**

**HUMAN RIGHTS – A BAPTIST PERSPECTIVE  
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I begin with what is for us Baptists a customary disclaimer. The perspective on human rights that I am going to put forward may not be shared by all Baptists. But I believe that it is true to our history and ecclesiology, and would be accepted by the majority 'mainstream' of Baptists in Europe and around the world. And in this field we Baptists have been greatly inspired by iconic figures such as Martin Luther King and Jimmy Carter who in different ways have linked their Baptist faith and identity with a lifelong commitment to the struggle for human rights.

1. Baptists come to their understanding of human rights in the context of their early history in almost every country of Europe; as a persecuted minority deprived of many of their human rights by an alliance of government and state church. And indeed in a few countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia, this is still the case. Therefore from our four hundred year history we know what it like to suffer not just a denial of our religious freedom but the loss of other rights as well, such as economic rights, personal liberty, exclusion from full participation in society, and a denial of the full protection of the law.

2. The early Baptists began with a view of the sovereignty of God and the universal lordship of Jesus Christ. This led them to conclude that no ruler or government has the right to dictate the religion of their people; nor to privilege one religious group at the expense of discriminating unfairly against another. Much of what is now enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on religious freedom for all, was first articulated in the English language by the early English Baptist leader Thomas Helwys in the year 1612.

3. On the wider human rights, Ernst Troeltsch and others have pointed out that the modern concept of human rights has its origins even earlier than the French Revolution; in the radical English puritan movements of the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. In particular it was a Baptist, Richard Overton, who first argued for human rights for all human persons, and in addition to the freedom of religion spoke about economic rights and the rights connected of democratic participation in society. In doing this he was shaped by a biblically-based moral vision which he then sought to restate in a language which people of faith or un-faith could understand and relate to. I shall return to this point about the language of human rights later.

4. Another feature of Baptist identity and ecclesiology is important to understand our stance on human rights. Baptists have placed much more emphasis on the *community* of faith rather than the *individual* as the locus for the discernment of the word of God, and the resultant moral vision. This community is seen as being under the rule of Christ and bound together by a covenant with Christ and with each other. Therefore the interest for Baptists is not such much of how individuals see their individual human rights but on how communities of faith discern and articulate their moral visions which leads to their view of human rights. On the whole Baptists have rejected the Augustinian and Lutheran 'two kingdoms' model which tends to relegate human rights to the secular sphere; and have rather sought for an integrated understanding which argues from their theological convictions to a position which they then can put on the table in dialogue with others who come from very different standpoints. I shall elaborate on this point shortly.

5. In their rejection of the concept of a state church and in consequence of that their internationalist spirit, Baptists have strongly argued for universal human rights not linked to a narrow nationalism, beginning with that early plea for universal religious freedom.

6. Baptists have sought to shape their community life and their moral vision by the Scriptures, as they are discerned by the community of faith meeting together. In common with other churches their starting point for human rights is the dignity and worth of every human being regardless of status or moral state. To this we add the possibility and potential of the redemption of every human being by the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and the inseparable link between love of God and love of neighbour.

7. As this Conference is dealing with difficult questions for the churches in the sphere of human rights, let me now state what I think is the difficult question arising for us, and perhaps other churches, resulting from what I have defined so far. Simply stated, it is the question of what is the relationship between a commitment to human rights arising out of the biblically-based moral vision on the one hand, and the universal human rights of the UNDHR and the ECHR on the other, especially when those two visions are in tension with each other. Of course there is a broad measure of agreement of what constitutes basic and universal human rights. As churches we should welcome this and not be surprised by it. But one could see the example of a church's stance on a moral issue which appears to undermine a generally accepted human rights convention on e.g. the rights of women, or employing homosexual men and women within the organisation of a church.

8. Here it is important to note that so-called 'secular' view of human rights is also based on a moral vision – there is no morally neutral stance here. So in the examples I have given, rights enshrined in the Conventions begin to be in tension with one another or even clash with one another; for the churches they can especially be in tension with the right of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. There is already some case history in the European Court of Human Rights where a secular interpretation of the European Convention has tried to say to a religious faith group that they must change their beliefs or ethical standpoint to fit with a 'foundational' view of human rights. Now when I have read some of these cases I might find myself personally not agreeing with stances of the faith groups concerned. But that is not the point. A fundamental principle must be that it cannot be right for any view of human rights from a dominant group to be used to undermine the moral integrity of another.

8. Is there a way through this impasse for those of us who would not want to consign human rights to a secular 'kingdom' or 'realm' Here I draw on the work of some Baptist social ethicists, especially Glen Stassen and Michael Westmoreland-White working in the USA. I mention again that for Baptists the forming of the moral vision which gives rise to human rights is not primarily a matter of the individual but of the whole community of faith, which for us means primarily the local church as the covenanted community of believers living under the rule of Christ; but also not excluding wider council with other Baptists and indeed ecumenical partners. We are interested therefore in how the different communities of faith and unfaith which make up a given society arrive at a shared understanding of human rights. So we would be among those who would like to see the various Conventions concerning human rights have a much more healthy balance between individual and communal rights.

9. This view sees human rights not as having a universal *foundation* but a universal *application*. As I have said, Baptists from the beginning have in this way argued for universal human rights. But we must also recognise the diversity and distinctive voices of different moral traditions and communities which make up a given society, including our own, in my case the Baptist churches of Europe. This recognition of difference and diversity seems to me to be especially important in a Europe which is increasingly multi-faith, multi-ethnic and multi cultural.

10. In order to do this we should see not human rights language as a kind of *Esperanto* which leads to the moral equivalent of a monoculture. But rather human rights is 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 participants will be open to the insights of others which may come from very different starting points and also open to themselves being challenged and changed by the experience.

11. What follows from all this is that there needs to be a space in our European societies and within the European Union itself for diverse communities to come together, each preserving the integrity of its own moral vision; but then to use the *lingua franca* of human rights to seek to agree on them; but also to have a mechanism to recognise differences and to deal with the difficult questions which arise from them

12. The Baptist churches I represent, and perhaps others, sometimes feel today that a 'foundationalist' view of human rights is sometimes used as a new orthodoxy, to then be hostile to some sincerely held beliefs of different faith groups. So there is the danger that such churches and faith groups pull back from engaging with human rights and their defence altogether; or they only accept their own particular view and definitions of human and refuse to be open to others. I think we already see this happening in some cases. The approach which I have tentatively put forward is one 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 and defending their abuse, but also where we can 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

13. I offer this (humbly, I hope!) as an approach which is a kind of middle way between a view which consigns human rights to a secular sphere without an ongoing critical evaluation of them by the churches; and one which would seek to define human rights in a narrowly confessional way with no real possibility or interest in dialogue with others. The practical consequences of this would be that, first, it is good that we are having this Conference looking difficult questions among the churches. And secondly, that we extend this dialogue to include other faiths and those who might define themselves as atheists and secularists. We will expect to find, I believe, a large measure of agreement as was the case when the UN Declaration was brought together. But the difficult questions are increasingly there and they should not be handled by trying to impose what is perceived to be the prevailing orthodoxy concerning human rights on those who may find some aspects of them difficult to accept. We need that inter-cultural inter-community space to listen to one another with respect and integrity and an open-ness to the other who is different from us. Where will it be found?

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