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Autor:	Weller, Paul
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Historical Sources and Contemporary Resources of Minority Christian Churches: A Baptist Contribution

Paul Weller

1. Introduction

Christianity is a global religious tradition with an influence that stretches far beyond its committed faithful followers. Many cultures, societies and states have been shaped by its history and values. The challenges of living together posed by our globalizing and pluralizing world today, and how Christians and Churches understand and put into practice issues related to religion, state and society relationships, are of importance not only for Christians and for Christianity, but also for people of other religions and none. Although, strictly speaking, Christianity is not an indigenous religion of Europe, it has played a major part in the emergence and development of European societies and states. European discussions on religion(s) and belief, state and society relations today do not begin from an abstract and ahistorical starting point, whether in political science or theology or, more specifically, ecclesiology. Rather, they are rooted in histories that are not only a matter of what is past, but are also “heritages” or “inheritances” that bring the past into the present. Such inheritances are, in turn, informed by a mixture of principled religious, social and political presuppositions that are deployed in the present, together with unreflective and perhaps largely unconscious inherited assumptions and, all too often, loose and inconsistent use of concepts such as “secular state”, “state church”, “Christian society”, “secular society” to describe often substantially differing realities.

As I have argued elsewhere, the current socio-religious reality of the UK and Europe can best be described as a “three-dimensional” one of Christian inheritance, secular reaction, and increasing religious plurality but that, especially at the national level, state political, constitutional and legal arrangements generally do not reflect this contemporary socio-religious reality.¹ Further, when it is clear that there is a disjunction between current socio-religious realities and state constitutional arrangements, there can often be a reluctance to consider the possibility of change – both

¹ See my *Time for a Change. Reconfiguring Religion, State and Society* (London: T & T Clark, 1995), among other publications.

on the part of the state authorities, and among religion and belief communities and groups. This can sometimes be because of vested interests on the part of both the state and religious groups in relation to the present arrangements. But often it can simply be because it is much more comfortable to remain with things as they are than to initiate changes, for, as Samuelson and Messick argue,

any change in a social institution will involve transition costs. Replacing the status quo with any alternative system will generally involve costs that simply maintaining the status quo avoids. Such transition costs tend to add to the attractiveness of what is relative to what might be.²

And because of such “transition costs”, Samuelson and Messick argue further that a certain degree of “risk aversion” is normal on the grounds that

people are generally familiar with the properties of the status quo, whereas the qualities of an alternative system may only be guessed at. There is, in short, less uncertainty about the status quo than about rival systems. Risk aversion would therefore cause one to view competing systems somewhat less favourably, even if the status quo’s deficiencies were clear. Better to have a system whose flaws are known than one that might bring unpleasant surprises.³

How the state and legal systems deal with issues posed by increasing social, cultural and religious plurality are of great importance to the future of the societies in which we live. In modern societies the state and the law are generally determinative for social reality. But it is important also to ask how religion or belief communities and groups *themselves* relate to the diversity of religion and belief in our globalizing and pluralizing world. In Europe in particular, how the Christian Churches work on these issues with regard to their own self-understandings is likely to be of great importance both for these Churches and for the states and societies in which they are set. Only through critical engagement with their own ecclesiologies in conscious engagement with their increasingly socially and religiously pluralistic environments can they ensure that any wider political, legal and constitutional changes that do occur do not come about as something externally imposed by a secular state (as happened in parts of Central and

² Charles Samuelson/David Messick, ‘Let’s Make Some New Rules: Social Factors That Make Freedom Unattractive’, in: Roderick Kramer/David Messick (eds), *Negotiation as a Social Process* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 48–68: 63.

³ Ibid.

Eastern Europe under Communist rule), but rather happen in ways that the Churches can themselves both contribute to and embrace vis-a-vis the integrity of their own self-understandings.

This paper holds that the contributions of minority Christian traditions are likely to be a critically important ecumenical resource for this process. All too often such minority historical sources and potential contemporary resources have been left out of debates that more often focus almost exclusively on the Roman Catholic, Orthodox or Anglican traditions, or those of the Reformed, Lutheran and Zwinglian traditions of the Magisterial Reformation. Contributions from Christian minority traditions could include the Old Catholic (Christkatholisch) tradition along with others such as the Waldensians or the Hussites. However, this paper focuses on what might be called the “baptistic”⁴ traditions of European Christianity and, within that, the English Baptist tradition.⁵ Thus this paper focuses on, refers to, and discusses some Baptist historical sources and asks whether there might be something of enduring value in these *sources*, which have arguably been “held in trust” by the Baptist tradition and its associated communities, and which might be capable of deployment as contemporary ecumenical *resources* for the benefit of Churches, states and societies in Europe. And despite the challenges involved in any attempt to bridge the historical and hermeneutical gaps between the self-understanding expressed in earlier Baptist ecclesiology and our twenty-first century realities, this paper proceeds on the basis that this is at least to some extent possible. Further, for the sake of the wider Church, other (especially minority) religions, as well as states and societies in Europe, this is a task that needs to be undertaken.

2. The “Baptistic” Christian Vision: Historical Sources

It is just over 400 years since the founding among English exiles in Amsterdam in the early seventeenth century of what are today known as Baptist Christian communities. The precise historical and theological rela-

⁴ “Baptistic” is a term that has been used to refer to aspects of the historic Baptist vision shared by other Christian Churches that have a similar ecclesiology, but which are not formally called Baptist, for example Mennonite and some other congregationally-based traditions.

⁵ The English Baptists emerged out a process of dialogical confluence and differentiation between English Separatism and strands of continental Anabaptism, including especially that of Mennonites in the Netherlands.

tionship of these communities with what are more broadly known as Anabaptist traditions is contested – sometimes in relation to the historical evidence alone, and sometimes out of a wish on the part of sections of the Baptist tradition to differentiate itself from the Anabaptist traditions which, at least in much of the wider religious and political imagination, were linked with such events as the attempt to establish a theocracy in Münster and the idea of religious fanaticism.

In general terms, Christians who today call themselves Baptists trace their origins back to the Separatist congregation that, in 1606, began to meet in the home of Thomas Helwys – a Nottinghamshire gentleman who, along with one John Smyth, became one of the *Kirchenväter* of English Baptist life. Smyth was a Cambridge scholar and had been the Anglican Chaplain to the City of London. The congregation that they founded was constituted in 1606 or 1607 through the so-called “Gainsborough Covenant”. With the accession to the throne in 1603 of King James I of England, the congregation had migrated to Amsterdam where they developed contacts, among others, with the Waterlander Mennonites. However, tensions developed as Smyth moved closer to the Mennonites and eventually a split occurred with the majority following Smyth. In 1611, Helwys’ group drew up a *Confession of Faith*, which became one of the basic Baptist confessions. Smyth died in 1612 and the majority of his group then joined the Mennonites, whilst Helwys and his group returned to England and founded a Baptist church in Spitalfields, London. Helwys was imprisoned and died in 1616, and little is then known about the history of his underground church apart from some materials that are available in Mennonite Archives. But by 1644, at least 47 Baptist congregations traceable to this beginning (and later known as General Baptists) were in existence.⁶

It is important to realise that the early leaders of the Christian development now known as “Baptist” did not understand themselves to be founding a new branch of Christianity. The name “Baptist” was given by outsiders to those Christians whose form and style of being Christian was especially linked with their distinctive practice of not baptising babies but only those who themselves could personally make a Christian confession

⁶ Other separatist congregations of different origins were known as “Particular Baptists” because of their more Calvinist beliefs. They eventually grew to be the majority of those that formed the Baptist Union of Great Britain, in which some General Baptists were also involved, while others became Unitarian, and others continue till today with their General Baptist identity.

of faith. However, these “Baptist” Christians saw themselves as trying to bring about a *restoration* of the Christian Church of New Testament times from before what they came to see as its confusion with civil society consequent upon the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire by the Emperor Constantine in the 4th century. While today the Baptist tradition is a minority Christian one in the UK and Europe, globally it is one of the largest confessional Christian communities with over 48 million followers in groups affiliated with the Baptist World Alliance, and perhaps at least as many again not affiliated. Although encompassing much internal diversity, it has had a generally consistent position on the question of relationships between religion, state and society. This, in turn, is strongly rooted in its commitment to religious freedom. At the same time, it is also clear that in parts of the contemporary Baptist scene there are those who have lost sight of the importance of its historic emphases, leading either to a pietistic withdrawal from the wider state and society or (as among some of the contemporary Southern Baptists in the USA) into an alignment with Christian New Right forces that are seeking to mould societies in particular ways.

There are five key “notes” of the Baptist Christian tradition that are of special significance in relation to the challenges and opportunities of religious plurality and inter-religious relations.⁷ These are: (i) the primacy of the scriptures; (ii) liberty of conscience and religious practice; (iii) the Church as a fellowship of believers; (iv) the centrality of Christian witness; and (v) the importance of discipleship. Furthermore, one of the distinctive (though not exclusive) aspects of Baptist Christianity is the practice of believer’s baptism for it symbolically challenges any geographical or social conception of the Christian Church as a body that is co-terminal with a nation or state. Ironically, though, for Baptists, baptism in itself is not seen as central. Rather, the ecclesiological vision of a church is constituted by individuals freely choosing to commit themselves to one another and to God in the spirit and fellowship of the Good News of Jesus. Baptism upon confession of faith flows from that commitment. This is often described as a position of “voluntarism”, and it is certainly the case that some expressions of this approach have tended to portray the Church as something like

⁷ Paul Weller, ‘Freedom and Witness in a Multi-Religious Society: A Baptist Perspective. Part I’, *Baptist Quarterly* 33 (1990) 6, 252–264; Paul Weller, ‘Freedom and Witness in a Multi-Religious Society: A Baptist Perspective. Part II’, *Baptist Quarterly* 33 (1990) 7, 302–315.

a democratic political party which one joins and leaves, and in which context the “priesthood of all believers” is seen in terms of form of church governance equivalent of the wider political notion of “one person one vote”. However, more classically speaking, voluntarism is balanced by a strong sense of the covenantal formation of the Church, both in terms of the commitment of individual members to each other, and in the sense of being taken up into a wider covenant in which the person and work of Jesus is the constitutive and binding operative factor, through the presence and work of the Spirit.

Of course, such Baptist convictions concerning the proper relationship between religion(s), state(s) and societies also emerged in a specific historical context against a background of legally enforced religious uniformity and in a broader European context of the fallout from the Wars of Religion. Christendom had been devouring itself in fratricidal religious conflict of a kind that eventually led to a reactive movement to banish religion and religious difference into the private sphere. From a religious perspective, the kind of approach from which the Baptist one became differentiated was expressed by John Smyth, writing at a time before he arrived at his new “baptistic” convictions on the nature of believing and belonging. As he put it in his 1605 *Patterne of True Prayer*, written while still a Puritan lecturer in London:

When there is toleration of many religions, whereby the kingdom of God is shouldered out of doors by the devil’s kingdom: for without question the devil is so subtle that he will procure, through the advantage of man’s natural inclination to false doctrine and worship, more by thousands to follow strange religions than the truth of God’s word: wherefore the magistrates should cause all men to worship the true God, or else punish them with imprisonment, confiscation of goods, or death as the quality of the cause requireth.⁸

In contrast to this was the position taken by the Baptist Kirchenvater, Thomas Helwys, in his pamphlet addressed to King James I called *The Mystery of Iniquity*, which was the first sustained argument for religious liberty published in the English language. One might retort that it is perhaps not surprising that those who were themselves either actively persecuted or passively disadvantaged should advocate toleration and even religious freedom. But Helwys (and this he shared with other early Baptists)

⁸ John Smyth, ‘A Patterne of True Prayer: Or an Exposition Upon the Lord’s Prayer’, in: idem, *The Works of John Smyth* (ed. William T. Whitley; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 2 vols: vol. 1, 73–247: 166.

did not apply this element of his vision only to the self-interest of his own discriminated-against religious group; nor even to the diversities of Christian belief. Instead, he declared:

O Let the King judge is it not most equal, that men should choose their religion themselves seeing they only must stand themselves before the judgment 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

while he also held that freedom of religion should extend beyond the Christian community, famously stating: “Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.”⁹ And in speaking of Turks he was, in the conventions of the times, referring to Muslims.

While this early Baptist commitment to the religious freedom of Jews and Turks was unusual, it could be argued that in the context of 17th century England these groups posed little immediate challenge and therefore Baptist support for their religious freedom did not mean as much as may now be thought. But the theological depth and tenacity of this commitment can perhaps better be appreciated in the light of what was, in general, the clear determination among Baptists to include Catholic Christians among those entitled to such freedom at a time when English Protestants feared a possible restoration of the Roman Catholic Church that they believed would threaten their own religion and civil liberties. The historic depth and the ubiquity of this concern about Catholics and Catholicism in the England of the 17th through to the 19th century is perhaps difficult to appreciate today. Resonating with contemporary fears that many in the West hold about Muslims as potentially subversive fifth columnists, suspecting that ultimate loyalties are focused elsewhere than the nation state, during the 17th century many Baptists shared in the similar and widespread Protestant suspicions of Catholics. When one adds to that the substantial theological divergences that existed between themselves and Catholics, the fact that Baptists by and large remained true to their principles by including Catholics within their stand for religious liberty is convincing evidence about the theological grounding of these convictions.

⁹ Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1612) (ed. Robert Groves; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 53.

Generally speaking, therefore, such Baptist historical sources are *not* to be understood in terms of an emergent “rationalistic”, “humanistic”, “liberal” or “modern” adaptation to a plural world consequent upon a weariness with religious conflict or, as more recently, the loss of the power or influence of traditional religion in the public sphere. These sources are also not an expression of religious indifferentism, nor are they a purely pragmatic approach to the management of religious plurality and/or conflict – although the tradition’s potential for pragmatic benefits of these kinds is an opportunity carefully to consider. Rather, they are more theologically rooted in distinctive understandings of the relationship between human beings and the divine, and between the community of Christian disciples and the wider community. This understanding was informed by a particular approach to the Christian scriptural tradition that contrasted with the more totalising attempts – from both the Magisterial and the revolutionary Anabaptist wings of the Reformation – to invoke the theocratic patterns of the Hebrew Scriptures as a template for the establishment of a civil community that would embody the biblical vision of justice and righteousness, in a similar way as do contemporary “Islamist” and “Jihadist” groups in relation to Islam and the Qur'an. In contrast to such a totalizing vision of the relationship between religion, state and society, “Baptistic” Christians have generally held to a conviction that the scriptures should be interpreted according to a predominantly Christological and soteriological hermeneutic. This approach accorded a relative primacy to the writings of the New Testament and was at least partly responsible for leading Baptists away from an attempt to recreate the theocratic patterns of the Hebrew scriptures. It rested upon the theologically prior conviction about the importance of religious believing as a freely chosen life orientation and commitment. It provided a basis for seeking the restoration of what was believed to be a New Testament pattern of Church life. It also reinforced a differentiation between the Church and the social order, leading to an alternative approach to being Christian in society and the state as compared with that of a Christendom model.

In 1614, the Baptist Leonard Busher published a pamphlet entitled *Religion's Peace*, in which he argued that, “if the believing should persecute the unbelieving to death, who should remain alive?” It was his conviction that “persecution for difference in religion is a monstrous and cruel beast, that destroyeth both prince and people, hindereth the gospel of Christ, and

scattereth his disciples that witness and profess his name".¹⁰ This implies the Baptist Christian tradition should not support those who seek to restrict the social space of other religions, but rather it should support the extension of such social space. And lest it should be thought that this was a merely abstract argument, in practical terms, Jews had been expelled from England in 1290 and in 1614 Leonard Busher published a tract advocating they be allowed to return, followed by John Murton in 1615 and Roger Williams in 1654. This is not to suggest that the return of the Jews was a direct result of the intervention of Baptists alone, but rather that the readiness to deal with religious plurality and indeed its extension was supported by the likes of Busher, Murton and Williams. Baptistic ecclesiological visions have challenged any form of religion and state relationship in which either religion or state are instrumentalized in the service of the other, or in which temporal structures are held to approximate to a Divine blueprint.

Of course, there is an opposite, and perhaps equal danger to that of creating a totalizing vision of religion, state and society, and it is one into which some parts of the baptistic vision of Christianity have fallen through a pietistic withdrawal from the structures and processes of civil society, and especially of governance, on the basis that these have become so far removed from a religious vision of what the government and the state should be, therefore the wisest course of action is to avoid engagement with them and, instead, concentrate on personal religious life in the family and among like-minded religious people. Pietistic withdrawal from the world has become more common among Baptist Christians today. But historically, such withdrawal was more a characteristic of certain (though by all means not all) parts of the Anabaptist tradition than it was among mainstream English Baptists.

Apart from theological and ecclesiological roots of, and arguments for, baptistic visions of the relationship between religion, state and society, there are also more pragmatic ones which may resonate more directly with the secular logics of contemporary state and society, while also speaking

¹⁰ Leonard Busher, 'Religion's Peace: Wherein is Contained Certain Reasons against Persecution for Religion: Also a design for a peaceable reconciling of those that differ in opinion', in: Edward Underhill (ed.), *Tracts on the Liberty of Conscience and Persecution, 1614–1657* (London: Hanserd Knollys Society, 1846), 1–81: 21.

to people with religious identification. Thus, for example, alongside his theological and ecclesiological arguments Busher also challenged Christians in referring to Muslim treatment of Christians and Jews in Constantinople, which he held up as an historical exemplar:

I read that a bishop of Rome would have constrained a Turkish emperor to the Christian faith, unto whom the emperor answered, “I believe that Christ was an excellent prophet, but he did never, so far as I understand, command that men should, with the power of weapons be constrained to believe his law: and verily I also do force no man to Mahomet’s law.” And I read that Jews, Christians, and Turks are tolerated in Constantinople, and yet are peaceable, though so contrary the one to the other.¹¹

Nevertheless, if living within such a framework of toleration is to be welcomed, then for its deepening and extension it is important that this is done not only externally to the religious traditions of the world, through secular reasoning and the instruments of international law, but also that it be developed in articulation with the logic and the grammar of the religions. And, in arguing for the potential significance of the Baptist theological and ecclesiological sources as contemporary resources, this is not to argue for one confessional tradition over and against other forms of Christianity, making any imperious claims for baptistic ways of being Christian. Nevertheless, precisely because there are *distinctive* notes within various Christian traditions, for contemporary ecumenical conversation and social development it is important to highlight what might be offered as religiously authentic, creative and corrective resources from the baptistic tradition that can help contemporary individual Christians, but also Churches, to live in faithful, committed and peaceful ways in a religiously diverse world.

3. Terror and Incitement to Terror as Challenges to Peaceable Visions

Before pressing its concluding argument, this paper acknowledges that, generally speaking, Baptist Christians have been more on the underside of history and of power than among those who wield it. As a consequence, the question must be asked about how far this inheritance might represent only an untested ideal, or whether it might really be capable of being a (re)source in terms of a theological ethics that can inform the belief and practice of the Christian community and also as a contribution to what

¹¹ Ibid., 24.

might be a broader political wisdom. A test case for this can be seen in what might be called the “securitisation” of Muslims in England and elsewhere under a cloak of suspicion, just as Catholics once were. Muslims in the UK, and in European societies more broadly, have found themselves targeted by successive surveillance measures and subject to new anti-terrorism introduced in the wake of 9/11, the Madrid railway bombings of 2004 and the 7/7 bomb attacks on the London transport system, in the wake of which, for example, the UK introduced one of the longest periods of detention without charge in any jurisdiction.¹² This anti-terrorism legislation, among other things, covered possession of items “likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism”.

A concrete example of the tensions and issues arising from such as at the interface of terror in the name of religion and the freedom of religion and wider expression, however shocking, can be illustrated through the case of the then 23-year-old Samina Malik, the so-called “Lyrical Terrorist”. Malik was, in 2007, the first Muslim woman in Britain to be found guilty under section 58 of the *Terrorism Act, 2006*,¹³ although she committed no act of terror in the commonly accepted understanding of that concept. She was, however, a shop assistant working at Heathrow Airport with airside security clearance who posted a series of poems on websites, about martyrdom, raising children to fight, and killing non-believers. In internet messages she called herself “Stranger Awaiting Martyrdom”. From 2003, while at school, Malik had written poetry using rapping style under the name “Lyrical Babe”. In 2004 she had changed this pen-name to “Lyrical Terrorist” and had started wearing the hijab. She also joined “Jihad Way”, an organisation that had been set up to support al-Qaeda. As reported in *The Guardian* newspaper,¹⁴ her poem, *How to Behead*, expressed the view that “It’s not messy or as hard as some may think, It’s all about the flow of the wrist ... You’ll feel the knife hit the wind and food pipe, But Don’t Stop, Continue with all your might.” This, and her poem *The Living Martyrs*, reflects a view of the world that is dualistically bleak and unattractive, reflecting the perspective not only of those actively willing to use terror in

¹² Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims are Coming. Islamophobia, Extremism and the War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2014).

¹³ ‘Suspended Sentence for the “Lyrical Terrorist”’, *The Independent*, 7 December 2007.

¹⁴ “‘Lyrical Terrorist’ Has Suspension Quashed”, *The Guardian*, 17 December 2008.

the name of religion, but also one that, at the time, many young Muslims had come to share. At the same time, Malik's defence counsel argued of such poetry that it was, in principle, no different to that of Wilfred Owen's anti-First World War poetry in its shocking depiction of violence and anger. And, indeed, in terms of historical context one should not forget that it comes out of a time in Europe in which, during the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, there were the camps and mass murder sites of Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Malik did not, as far as is known, commit or directly support any acts of terror violence. She was later released from prison on appeal against her conviction, although the police had found at her house, among other similar documents, a copy of Bin Laden's *Declaration of War*, and in it a passage in which Malik praised Bin Laden, noting that, "We will never let you have any peace. We will show no remorse, no mercy and no regrets". Clearly there are Muslims today who invoke the name of Islam in support of actions of terror and who see the world in Manichaean terms and want to establish a global Khalifate, by force if necessary, even if they themselves have not directly planned or participated in such actions. As the judge at her original trial stated, Malik was one who "was on the margin of what this crime concerns".¹⁵ Such a scenario is not so far removed from, and resonates with, previous historical contexts in which the strength and consistency of the resources of the baptistic way for living in a society of diverse and sometimes quite radically conflicting perspectives also came under challenge. Thus, in connection with Roman Catholic emancipation in English history, Timothy Larsen highlighted the issue of "the old, liberal dilemma of how to treat the illiberal; the recurring bugbear that they will exploit the opportunities afforded by a liberal society in order to destroy it" and he went on, even before 9/11 or 7/7, to write:

In today's world, liberals in various nations wonder uneasily if radical Islamic groups will mount a systematic attack on all they hold dear from the safe harbour of liberal rights, liberties and protections. In Victorian Britain, the Church of Rome was seen as a persecuting, illiberal body. The Inquisition was its heritage, and the treatment of Protestants in Catholic countries was still thought to be despicable. It was assumed that if Catholicism ever came to dominate Britain again, religious liberty would be swept away. There was a

¹⁵ Ibid.

long tradition of viewing Catholicism as a threat to the established government of the nation, with the Gun Powder Plot as just one link in the chain.¹⁶

That, historically, there were indeed Catholics in England who were a danger to the civil settlement is clear. When Mary had been Queen, persecution of Protestants was unleashed. After that, Catholics like Guido Fawkes, plotted with foreign powers to overthrow Parliament and the government of the day and, as Marotti points out:

The Gunpowder Plot produced England's first national day (Gunpowder Treason Day, later Guy Fawkes Day), and it established a firm association of Catholicism with terrorist ruthlessness, heightening the fears of Catholic murderousness and subversion that lasted not decades but centuries.¹⁷

In such a context, it is perhaps not surprising that while religious liberty is the nearest thing to a Baptist universal credo, there are exceptions to this general rule. For example, in his 1644 statement on religious liberty, Baptist theologian Christopher Blackwood made an exception for Catholics, even going so far as to say that it could be appropriate to remove them from the country (or, in modern parlance, to deport them) if their numbers threatened, and to do so at the point of a sword – in other words by the use of force, backed up by the threat, if not actuality, of legalised violence. At the same time, Timothy George stresses such views are “exceptions to the larger Baptist consensus that continued to advocate unrestricted religious liberty”.¹⁸

However, importantly, and in contrast to Mennonites, Baptists, in the language of the time, did not completely rule out the use of “the sword” by Christians – by which was meant not approval for individual violence but rather the potential and actual use of force to uphold social peace and justice, in the light of which, in contrast to Mennonites, Baptists allowed their church members to become magistrates. As George notes:

¹⁶ Timothy Larsen, *Friends of Religious Equality. Nonconformist Politics in Mid-Victorian England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999), 239.

¹⁷ Arthur Marotti, *Religious Ideology and Cultural Fantasy. Catholic and Anti-Catholic Discourses in Early Modern England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 144.

¹⁸ Timothy George, ‘Between Pacifism and Coercion: The English Baptist Doctrine of Religious Toleration’, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 58 (1984) 30–49: 49.

This positive position on magistracy was reflected at three crucial points (1) a defence of the ethics of war (2) a recognition that coercion was the precondition of social order and religious toleration (3) a willingness to admit magistrates to church membership.¹⁹

Another example is that of Thomas Helwys, who criticised Dutch Mennonites for attacking the office of the magistrate whilst living under the protection afforded by the Dutch rule of law of a kind that was lacking for many of their co-religionists in other countries. Referring to the Anabaptists' deliverance from the threat to their religious liberty posed by the Duke of Alva, Helwys argued that

Of all the people on earth none hath more cause, to be thankful to God for this blessed ordinance of Magistracy than you, and this whole country and nation, in that God hath by his power and authority given unto you magistrates who have so defended and delivered you from the hands of a cruel destroyer, and will you notwithstanding condemn this ordinance, and consider it a vile thing.²⁰

In seeking to understand how key sources of the Baptist tradition might become contemporary resources, it is therefore important neither to ignore the religious content of some modern-day terror threats, nor to be naïve about them, including the need, potentially, in some circumstances to use force to restrain terror. In order to combat such forms that religion can take there is a need precisely to understand that their religiously related content will not be defeated either by calls to liberalism and reasonableness, since that will be viewed as a betrayal of ultimate convictions; or by brute force and naked power, as that will only reinforce the self-righteousness of those who experience it.

4. The Potential of Baptistic Sources and Contemporary Resources

In thinking about the contemporary relationship of religion and belief, state and society, and in the face of potential threats from forms of religion that might themselves seek to undermine the religious liberty that the

¹⁹ Ibid., 49.

²⁰ Thomas Helwys, *An Advertisement or Admonition Unto the Congregations, Which Men Call the New Fryelers in the Lowe Countries*, quoted in George, "Between Pacifism and Coercion" (as note 18), 38.

baptistic heritage has sought to uphold, Timothy Larsen argues that the “most radical and consistent Nonconformists did not shrink from admitting that their principles could rightly be applied to all citizens, even if they happened to be Hindus, Moslems, Mormons or atheists”.²¹ At the same time, as I have elsewhere acknowledged,

it is not possible to draw straight hermeneutical lines between the actual plurality of the 19th century and the issues which arose in relationship between state, society, religious and cultural plurality in that century, and issues that we wrestle with as an inescapable part of the life in 21st century England. But at the same time, it would be a mistake for politicians, religious leaders, political scientists, sociologists, or contemporary scholars of religion to think that the contemporary issues of diversity are completely new.²²

From the wider Christian tradition there are indications of a recognition of the potential importance of the Baptist tradition. Jürgen Moltmann, for example, is one who argues that the future of the Church lies in this direction.

Whatever forms the free churches in England, America, and then, since the beginning of the 19th century also in Germany have developed (there are, of course, dangers, mistakes and wrong developments enough here too), the future of the church of Christ lies in principle on this wing of the Reformation because the widely unknown and uninhabited territory of the congregation is found here.²³

Christendom patterns were based on premises that are no longer pertinent to contemporary Church and society. They were rooted in a context that has since been radically transformed by the twin impacts of secularization and religious pluralization. In practical terms, this means it is necessary to find new ways of making a contribution to the wider society than those which rely upon the social, political, legal and constitutional institutionalization of position and role conferred by the Christendom inheritance. Patterns informed by Baptist theological and ecclesiological approaches might be shaped by the following:

²¹ Larsen, *Friends of Religious Equality* (as note 16), 239.

²² Paul Weller, ‘Roots, Development and Issues. 19th Century Prefigurations for State, Religious and Cultural Diversity in 21st Century England’, in: Lorraine Derocher et al. (eds.), *L’État canadien et la diversité culturelle et religieuse, 1800–1914* (Québec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2009), 181–214: 184–185.

²³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Open Church. Invitation to a Messianic Lifestyle* (London: SCM Press, 1978).

1. The Importance of Not Marginalizing Religions from Public Life
2. The Need to Recognize the Specificity of Religions
3. The Imperative for Religious Engagement with the Wider Community
4. The Need for a Reality Check
5. The Need to Recognize the Transnational Dimensions of Religions
6. The Importance of Religious Inclusivity
7. The Imperative of Inter-Religious Dialogue.²⁴

Taking these seven points, or theses, seriously means that the Churches would have to consider not only acceding to the impact upon their social position and power of changes coming about externally, but embracing the need and opportunity to take positive steps towards divesting themselves of the Christendom inheritance and learning to rely more upon the inherent power of that to which they seek to bear witness. To do this in an appropriately self-confident way requires theological and ecclesiological resources and it is the contention of this paper that the Baptist theological and ecclesiological vision offers suitable resources because it makes a very basic methodological contribution that gives a far more prominent place to theological ethics than has hitherto been the case.²⁵ In doing so, it posits the context and content of the social and political relations of religious communities as integral to the central tasks of Christian theology and practice, and maintains that the ethics of these relations forms an inseparable part of the form and content of Christian witness.

In this way, rather than promoting a mere adaptation of the Church through its theologically and ecclesiologically rooted approach to prevailing social trends, the Baptist Christian tradition can contribute to a new ecumenical basis for Christian attempts to engage with Europe's "three dimensional" socio-religious reality as the arena for contemporary Christian life and witness. Resources from the relative "underside" of Christian history, theology and ecclesiology can arguably bring some degree of

²⁴ See Paul Weller, 'Insiders or Outsiders. Religion(s), State(s) and Societ(ies). Propositions for Europe. Part I', *Baptist Quarterly* 39 (2002) 211–222; idem, 'Insiders or Outsiders: Religion(s), State(s) and Societ(ies). Propositions for Europe. Part II', *Baptist Quarterly* 39 (2002), 276–286; idem, 'Insiders or Outsiders? Propositions for European Religions, States and Societies', in: Alan Race/Ingrid Shafer (eds.), *Religion in Dialogue. From Theocracy to Democracy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 193–208.

²⁵ See also an earlier article in this journal, Paul Weller, "Theological Ethics and Interreligious Relations: A Baptist Christian Perspective", *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 104 (2014) 119–140.

challenge for historically powerful (Christian) traditions and a measure of opportunity for less powerful (other-than Christian and other Christian) traditions. They encourage greater honesty with each other, and with the state, whereby the current and relatively powerful majority Christian Churches can be released from the artificial burden of “representing others”, and may be able to discover anew how to “be themselves” in the increasingly pluralising environment of contemporary Europe.

*Paul Weller (*1956 Wrexham, Wales), PhD (University of Leeds, 1996) and DLitt (University of Derby, 2009), is since 2021 Non-Stipendiary Research Fellow in Religion and Society (and prior to that stipendiary from 2017) at Regent’s Park College, University of Oxford, UK, where he is Associate Director (UK) of the Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture, and an Associate Member of the University’s Faculty of Theology and Religion. He is also (since 2021) a Visiting Professor in the Research Institute for Peace, Security and Social Justice, Coventry University, UK (where he was previously a part-time Professor since 2016); and Emeritus Professor (since 2016) of the University of Derby, UK (where he was an academic in the study of religion since 2000, and Professor of Inter-Religious Relations from 1999 to 2016).*

*Address: Regent’s Park College, Pusey Street, Oxford, OX1 2LB, United Kingdom
E-Mail: paul.weller@regents.ox.ac.uk*

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag stellt die potenzielle Bedeutung eines «baptistischen» christlichen Erbes bei der Entwicklung zeitgenössischer christlicher theologischer und ekclsiologischer Ansätze heraus, die sich mit der wachsenden Säkularität und religiösen Pluralität Europas auseinandersetzen; der Autor sieht dies im Gegensatz zur Weiterführung solcher Ansätze, die entweder in heute unangemessenen Modellen des Christentums wurzeln oder lediglich eine Anpassung der Kirche an ihre Umgebung propagieren. Dieser Beitrag nimmt die mögliche Herausforderung solcher Sichtweisen ernst, die aus heutigen Terroranschlägen oder der Bezugnahme auf Terror im Namen von Religion entstehen. Derartige Ressourcen, die von der relativen «Unterseite» christlicher Geschichte stammen, sind einerseits in der Lage, historisch dominante christliche Traditionen in gebührender Weise herauszufordern; andererseits verhelfen sie weniger dominanten (andersreligiösen und anderen christlichen) Traditionen zu mehr Gleichberechtigung in der Gesellschaft. Werden diese Ressourcen eingesetzt, kann dies eine grössere gegenseitige Ehrlichkeit untereinander und dem Staat gegenüber fördern, bei der die heutigen, relativ mächtigen Mehrheitskirchen sich ihrer künstlichen Last, «ande-

re zu repräsentieren», entledigen können; auf diese Weise wird ihnen ermöglicht, neu zu entdecken, was es bedeutet, im zunehmend pluralisierten Europa «sich selbst zu sein».

Key Words – Schlüsselwörter

Christendom – Baptist – Ecclesiology – Pluralistic – State