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Thomas Helwys, the forgotten pioneer of religious freedom for everyone

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On 4 July, the United States of America celebrated the 250th anniversary of its independence. One of the freedoms most closely associated with the American experiment is freedom of religion. Yet the idea itself is older than the United States and it took time to implement in all the states of the USA.[2] The anniversary, however, provides a fitting opportunity to remember two earlier milestones.

The English Baptist Thomas Helwys was one of the earliest Christian authors – and, in the judgment of important modern scholarship, the first to argue comprehensively in English – for religious liberty extending beyond Christian dissenters to people of any religion. He was born around 1575; by 1615/16 he was dead, though the precise date and circumstances remain uncertain.[3]

A generation later, Roger Williams founded Providence in 1636. The early Providence agreements deliberately restricted political authority to "civil things" and affirmed liberty of conscience; Rhode Island's Royal Charter of 1663 later gave this experiment a durable constitutional form.[4]

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2 For the broader pre-1776 history, see Robert Louis Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), esp. 1-16, 109-52; John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558–1689* (Harlow: Longman, 2000).

3 Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, ed. Richard Groves (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 53; Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God*, 140-41. Groves calls Helwys's work the first exposition in English of universal religious liberty (Introduction, xxxi–xxxii). The formulation here is deliberately narrower than "the first ever," because earlier writers such as Sebastian Castellio had made major arguments for toleration. On the divergent dates given for Helwys's birth and death, see also *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Helwys, Thomas"; *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (GAMEO), s.v. "Helwys, Thomas (ca. 1575-ca. 1616)"; New World Encyclopedia, s.v. "Thomas Helwys."

4 For Providence, see the 1637 Providence Agreement, with its limitation to "civil things," in Online Library of Liberty, "1637: Providence Agreement"; and the 1640 Providence agreement affirming "liberty of Conscience." For the later constitutional settlement, see Charter of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations (1663), Avalon Project, Yale Law School; Rhode Island Department of State, "Rhode Island's Royal Charter." See also National Park Service, "Rhode Island: Roger Williams National Memorial."

The contemporary international concept of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is frequently presented mainly as a product of Enlightenment philosophy or post-1945 international law. The anniversaries commemorated in 2026 remind us that important strands of the idea are substantially older and include explicitly Christian arguments developed long before the Enlightenment.[5]

Many Christians before Helwys had argued against persecution or pleaded for toleration. Sebastian Castellio and other 16th-century writers are important examples. Helwys nevertheless took a distinctive step: he denied the civil magistrate jurisdiction over religion itself and framed the protected class in explicitly open-ended terms.

1. The life of a pioneer

Thomas Helwys was born around 1575 into a prosperous Nottinghamshire family and entered Gray's Inn in London in 1593, where he studied law. As a member of the English Separatist movement, he became convinced that the Church of England had departed from the pattern of the New Testament.[6]

When persecution intensified, Helwys and other members of the congregation associated with John Smyth went into exile in Amsterdam in 1607/08. There Helwys and Smyth rejected infant baptism and embraced believers' baptism, contributing to the emergence of the early Baptist movement.[7]

Unlike many religious refugees who remained in the Netherlands, Helwys returned to England with part of the congregation around 1612 and helped establish what is generally regarded as the first Baptist church on English soil. His return exposed him again to the religious coercion from which the group had fled.[8]

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5 Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God*, especially 82-152; Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration*, chs. 2-3. These works emphasize pre-Enlightenment Christian arguments without denying later Enlightenment and modern legal developments.

6 Joseph E. Early Jr., ed., *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 14-16; Larry J. Kreitzer, *New Light on the Early Years of Thomas Helwys* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2018). Kreitzer documents Helwys's admission to Gray's Inn in 1593. For additional biographical detail, see "Thomas Helwys of Gray's Inn and of Broxtowe Hall, Nottingham," Nottinghamshire History, and Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, s.v. "Helwys, Thomas."

7 Early, *Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys*; Larry J. Kreitzer, *Thomas Helwys and His World*, Part 1 (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2019). On the emergence of the Baptist movement from the Smyth-Helwys circle, see also Marvin Jones, *The Beginning of Baptist Ecclesiology: The Foundational Contributions of Thomas Helwys* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017). On the early history of the (General) Baptists, see also B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, rev. ed. (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1996); Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists, 1603-1649* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006); H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987).

8 Kreitzer, *Thomas Helwys and His World*, Part 1*; Early, Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys*. The precise chronology of Helwys's return is reconstructed from incomplete evidence; "around 1612" is safer than assigning a precise month.

2. The book that cost him his freedom

Around the time of his return, Helwys published *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1612). A surviving presentation copy contains his handwritten admonition to King James I that the king, being a mortal man, had no power over the immortal souls of his subjects.[9]

In the printed text Helwys stated the principle with exceptional clarity: "For men's religion to God is between God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man."[10]

For Helwys, this was not primarily a secular political argument but a theological one. Every human being must answer to God personally. The civil ruler therefore has legitimate authority in civil affairs but no divine commission to compel faith or judge the conscience.[11]

Helwys then wrote the sentence for which he is best remembered: "Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure."[12]

Readers usually notice "heretics," "Turks" (the contemporary English term for Muslims), and "Jews." For the early 17th century, that list was already strikingly broad. Yet the decisive words may be the final two: "or whatsoever."

Those words make the formulation open-ended. Helwys was not merely adding more religious groups to a list that the state should tolerate. He was denying the state authority to decide which religions were entitled to liberty. Religious freedom thus followed from a jurisdictional limit on civil government, not from the government's approval of particular beliefs. This is why Robert Louis Wilken describes Helwys's argument as a principled defence of liberty of conscience regardless of a person's faith.[13]

Helwys was subsequently imprisoned. Older accounts commonly place him in Newgate Prison and state that he died there around 1616; recent research cau-

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9 Helwys, *Short Declaration*, Preface and Introduction; the 1612 original is digitized in Early English Books Online via the University of Michigan, *A Shorte Declaration of the Mistery of Iniquity*, and in the Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

10 Helwys, *Short Declaration*, 53. Spelling and punctuation have been lightly modernized in the article text. In the original spelling: "for mens religion to God, is betwixt God and themselves; the king shall not answere for it, neither may the king be judg between God and man." A presentation copy Helwys sent to King James I survives in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and is digitized by the Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

11 For the theological and eschatological structure of Helwys's argument, see Matthew H. Young, "'To Hope, and to Wait': Roger Williams and the Eschatological Roots of Toleration," *History of Political Thought* 43, no. 1 (2022): 55-80; Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God*, 140-42.

12 Helwys, *Short Declaration*, 53. "Turks" was a common early-modern English designation for Muslims. Original spelling: "let them be heretikes, Turks, Iewes, or whatsoever it apperteynes not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure."

13 Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God*, 141; Young, "'To Hope, and to Wait'," 55-80. Wilken stresses that Helwys's case was not merely a defense of Christian nonconformists but a principled argument for conscience regardless of faith.

tions that the exact place, date, and circumstances of his death cannot be established with certainty. What is clear is that he disappeared from public life after challenging the Crown's religious authority and was dead within a few years.[14]

In that qualified sense, Helwys may be remembered as a martyr for religious liberty: he accepted grave personal risk while insisting that freedom of conscience belonged not merely to his own community but also to people whose beliefs he regarded as false.

3. Roger Williams: putting the principle into practice

A generation later, Roger Williams carried remarkably similar convictions across the Atlantic. Banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Williams founded Providence in 1636. The Providence compact limited obedience to the majority to "civil things," and the 1640 agreement explicitly reaffirmed "liberty of Conscience."[15]

Whether Williams read Helwys himself cannot be demonstrated conclusively. The intellectual connection with the early English Baptist tradition is nevertheless stronger than a mere resemblance: Williams's *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution* (1644) reproduces and engages material from John Murton, Helwys's successor among the English General Baptists. Recent scholarship therefore describes Williams's theory as in significant respects a continuation and critical development of arguments associated with Helwys and Murton.[16]

Providence and Rhode Island remained exceptional for many years. Religious liberty spread only gradually through the English colonies and later the United States. The American tradition therefore did not begin in 1776; it drew on earlier theological, colonial, and constitutional experiments.

4. A legacy worth remembering

Thomas Helwys can therefore be described, with appropriate historical qualification, as the earliest known Christian writer to formulate in English a com-

14 Kreitzer, *Thomas Helwys and His World*, Part 1, whose abstract explicitly notes that even the circumstances and date of Helwys's death remain matters of speculation; compare *Early, Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys*. The older Newgate narrative should therefore be stated cautiously. Older biographical sources include Nottinghamshire History and New World Encyclopedia. One concrete chronological datum is that Helwys's uncle Geoffrey Helwys, who died in 1616, left a bequest to Thomas's widow, Joan.

15 "1637: Providence Agreement," Online Library of Liberty; National Park Service, "Roger Williams," which notes that Providence settlers agreed to make laws "only in civil things"; Providence Combination of 1640, clause affirming continued "liberty of Conscience." For standard scholarly biographies of Roger Williams, see also John M. Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul: Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty* (New York: Viking, 2012); Edwin S. Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

16 Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (London, 1644), which incorporates John Murton's *A Most Humble Supplication* and John Cotton's response; Young, "'To Hope, and to Wait'," 55-80, especially his analysis of Williams as continuing and reworking a line of political theology developed by Helwys and Murton.

prehensive and explicitly open-ended claim to religious liberty for people of any faith. His concern was not simply to protect selected minorities but to deny the civil magistrate jurisdiction over the relationship between God and the human conscience.[17]

Roger Williams later demonstrated that a closely related principle could sustain a functioning political community. Together they show that a major strand in the history of religious freedom arose from biblical and theological reflection on the sovereignty of God, the dignity and accountability of conscience, and the limits of earthly government – well before the mature Enlightenment theories with which religious liberty is often associated.

As the United States continues beyond its 250th anniversary, it is worth remembering these deeper roots. The road to American religious liberty did not begin in Philadelphia or with the drafting of the federal Constitution. Important milestones had already been reached by an English dissenter who told his king that the Crown had no authority over the human conscience, and by a banished colonial dissident who helped translate such convictions into political practice.

17 The priority claim is best understood in this qualified form. See Helwys, *Short Declaration*, 53; Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God*, 140–41; John Coffey, "Puritanism and Liberty Revisited: The Case for Toleration in the English Revolution," *Historical Journal* 41, no. 4 (1998): 961–985, esp. 971. Earlier Christian pleas for toleration existed; Helwys's distinctiveness lies in the comprehensive, jurisdictional, and explicitly open-ended form of his claim.