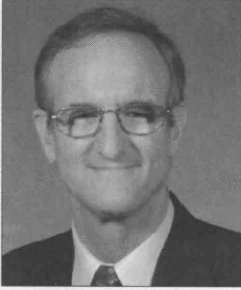


The Risk of Majority Faith



C. Douglas Weaver

C. Douglas Weaver is associate professor of religion and director of undergraduate studies in the Department of Religion, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

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If you want to find a good compelling story about Baptists who believed in religious liberty for all people, any Baptist history book worth its salt will tell you a few. We like to tell the story of the seventeenth-century gadfly, Roger Williams, who was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony because he defied the religious-based government of his day and then established Rhode Island, the first American colony to be formed on the principle of religious freedom. We highlight the fact that Williams spoke of soul liberty and understood that forced conversion and coercive conformity was a bloody tenet and produced hypocritical, artificial faith.

We like to tell the story of another seventeenth-century hero, Obadiah Holmes, who along with two other colonial Baptists, were arrested in Lynn, Massachusetts, for preaching to a man who was practically blind. Holmes refused an anonymous donor's offer to pay his bail, and consequently, he received a whipping of thirty lashes. His retort to the authorities who persecuted him is the stuff of legends: "You have struck me as with roses."¹

We like to tell the story of James Ireland, eighteenth-century evangelist in colonial Virginia. After being arrested for preaching, he spent time in the infamous Culpeper jail, known as a notoriously dangerous place. Ireland continued to preach to those outside the walls of the jail, even though his opponents cursed him and filled his cell with fumes of burning sulphur and pepper. Gunpowder was also exploded underneath the cell. However, Ireland

persevered and said that he had such a strong sense of God's presence in the jail that he signed his letters, "From my palace in Culpeper."²

We love the stories; they make us proud. As Baptists we love to say that religious liberty is our trophy. If we have made one significant contribution to American history, it is our tireless witness to religious liberty and the separation of church and state. And no doubt we have some Baptist heroes like Roger Williams, Obadiah Holmes, James Ireland, and countless others when it comes to advocating for religious liberty, freedom of conscience, and the separation of church and state.

But how do you and I really relate to them? These early Baptists were part of a persecuted minority. They were dissenters from government-supported religious practices. They were imprisoned for their faith. They took a risk to be a Baptist. What is our risk?

Have you ever wondered what it is like to be part of a persecuted minority religious sect? Maybe some of you know. But I expect most of you are like me and do not know. We are used to being a part of the majority. We are from the Bible Belt, maybe even the buckle of that belt. We are Baptists, the largest body of Protestants in the United States. One scholar, Martin Marty, even coined a new word to describe American religion: baptistification.³ We have climbed the ladder of success, numerically, socially, and intellectually. We have an air of respectability. We are the majority; hear us roar. But let us hear something as well.

The persecuted minority groups are the ones that pushed the Christian world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to face the music and hear cries for complete religious liberty. The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century were the first; the Baptists and Quakers were close behind. They were small and often on the fringes of their societies. They believed that at death we would individually have to answer to God for our lives. How could we do that, they asked, if the government or a state-sponsored church hinders our ability to worship? We need to be free, they said, totally free to worship and follow God as we believe that we are led by the Spirit of God. We need liberty of conscience to live as we are called to live now, and we need it to be prepared for that face-to-face meeting at the last judgment.

An atmosphere of religious freedom was not the situation 400 years ago for the earliest Baptists. The majority groups that were in charge—the established churches in the colonies that were supported by the English

government, whether it was the Anglicans or the Puritans—did not want to hear about religious freedom for all. Freedom for them as the majority, yes. Freedom for others, no.

Why? They were much too afraid to let people different from them have freedom. They became confident that they had the market cornered on how to judge and defend orthodoxy. And as the majority, they thought God had blessed them. They had earned the right to dictate to others what to believe and how to worship. They were the “city on a hill.” They were the Christian nation. They were on God’s errand in the wilderness. They alone should decide who could preach or not, or where or to whom a person could preach. And of course as the majority they used the power of the sword of the state to punish any wayward misguided heresies and disobedience. And yes, they defined heresy.

It is a tragically ironic story that the Puritans fled to America to escape religious persecution, but when they became the majority, they became the persecutors. As one minority critic said, “they tell the common people they should read the Bible but then they tell the common people they have to agree with the interpretation of the state supported church. Those in charge only listen to the music that pleases them.”⁴ Or as another Baptist critic said, whenever you try to force a union of church and state to create a Christian nation, you have created a monster that denies liberty of conscience to anyone who dares to be different.⁵

I wonder whether I can do what I am asking you to do today. Can we hear Bible passages in the way that persecuted minorities have heard them when they talk about freedom? Can we read Bible passages like persecuted minorities would when they were being denied religious freedom by the government or by a majority group that was defining how free they could be? Do we see freedom in the story of the Exodus? Yes, we see it in Moses. But, do we ever hear the music in the Exodus story and hear that God is against institutions and government actions that oppress and enslave people? Do you remember what Moses said to the Pharaoh, “Let my people go.” Why? Let them be free so that can go worship God because this is what God has called us to do (Ex. 5:1).

Well, we with our majority faith did not dare apply those words to the Pharaoh to us in the 1850s or the 1950s. How about today in a pluralistic society in which so many religious groups are clamoring for equal

treatment with our majoritarian faith? Can we hear Moses' cry for freedom to worship for the minority? What do you think?

We love to read about the faith commitment of Daniel in the Old Testament. Now there was somebody who could actually sing with integrity, "I Surrender All" or "Wherever He Leads I'll Go." Daniel prayed daily and then refused to cease praying when the government told him to stop. He ended up in the lion's den because he did not blindly equate his citizenship with his loyalty to God. Does that story tell us anything about how we should treat those who pray differently than us? Does it tell us how we should relate church and state when it comes to religion? Does it tell us to beware when government begins to get in the prayer business? Do we realize that Daniel's example of freedom in the midst of government persecution is a minority faith? How can you and I identify with Daniel when we are wearing our majority suits and dresses?

We all affirm John 8:32, when Jesus said that the truth shall set us free. We love that verse. We believe it applies to spiritual freedom. We affirm Christ as the truth set us free from the bondage of our sin. But does the passage say anything about being set free to follow God as we believe God has called us to? Does it say anything about the God-given right to freedom of conscience? About being set free to allow others their freedom to worship according to the dictates of their God-given conscience?

I think we hear Acts 4 and 5 and give praise for those early Christians who stood firm in the faith amid persecution. The apostles Peter and John were arrested for preaching, and then they were commanded to stop speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus. If they had shut up as commanded, they would have been spiritually bound to a law that hindered their worship of God. If they had been locked up, they would have been free in their spirit despite their outward chains. Their freedom to speak was rooted in the freedom they received from God. They could only speak of what they had seen and heard and experienced. They had to obey God rather than any human authority.

But remember that they were being persecuted as a minority. So how do we apply their story to us as a majority? How do we apply their words, "I'll obey God rather than man," when we beg our state for religious favoritism? Does this story warn us at all about our majority imposing our religious practices on others in this country?

I suppose it is possible for us to say that the minority groups have read their own situations into these kinds of scripture passages. But I just wonder who really understands the implications of freedom. Those people who do not have it and desperately want it, or those people who have it and are being threatened with the loss of control of it?

Christians today who constantly clamor for government aid might do well to remember the Baptists of Colonial Virginia. Before the American Revolutionary War, the Anglican Church was the established church there. Citizens were required to pay taxes in support of the state church. Dissenting ministers had to be licensed by the government in order to preach. Baptists opposed these government practices because they believed that God's call, not a human government, gave them the right to preach. It is a well known story that Baptists and other dissenters joined hands with political leaders such as James Madison and were successful in disestablishing the Anglican Church, thus denying government support for one church.

But what would come next after disestablishment? The very popular politician, Patrick Henry, of "give me liberty or give me death" fame, said that there should be a general assessment tax for religious purposes. Every citizen would pay a tax to the church of his or her choice. The proposed law was fair to everyone since no church was favored by the state over the other, Henry reasoned. His arguments were attractive to practically everyone because they agreed that religion was the basis of morality and the new Virginia state government needed a solid moral foundation. Coming from an eloquent orator like Henry, the plan sounded good. George Washington supported it. The Anglicans thought it was the best they could hope for in the wake of disestablishment.

But the Baptists opted for radical dissent and the separation of church and state. They were the only religious group—they were still a minority faith—who opposed the general assessment bill and supported the work of Madison, who defeated the measure in the legislature. What was wrong with a general assessment? Baptists asked what was right about it. Why do we need the support of the government to keep religious faith alive and well, they asked? Does a compulsory general assessment imply that religion will fail if not propped up by the state? Wait a minute, the Baptist retorted, isn't Christianity a voluntaristic faith? Where there is freedom, God's truth will prevail, those revolutionary Baptists said. God's truth needs

no crutch; it needs no prop to survive. It needs no majoritarian coercive tactics to flourish; rather, it needs freedom of conscience given by God.

Can we look in the mirror of our majoritarian faith today and see its risks? Our risk is that we cease to affirm religious liberty for all because we are now the majority. Our risk is that we fear losing our status as a majority faith in an ever increasing pluralistic world, so our response is to assert oppressive control only majorities can pull off. Our risk is that we now become like the colonial Puritans and think that freedom is only for us and should be defined by us. Our risk is that we hide behind bad history and the rhetoric of being a Christian nation to justify religious favoritism toward our majority viewpoint. The problem is that our forefathers and foremothers were persecuted by so called national churches.

Our risk is that we abandon, even denigrate, the separation of church and state that we desperately cried for when we were a minority faith in our infant years. Our risk is that we deny voice to dissenters, tragically forgetting that we were birthed as dissenters who pled for freedom of conscience. Our risk is that we forget that freedom is a gift from God, and not ours to withhold.

Our hope is found Jesus Christ, who as the Truth calls all captives to freedom (Lk. 4:16).

Our hope is found in the freedom that God gives all people, not just majorities but also minorities, to worship him, to read his word, and to be obedient to the Lordship of Christ according to the dictates of conscience.

BH&HS

1. Obadiah Holmes to John Spilsbury, William Kiffin et. al., 1651, in John Clarke, *III Newses from New-England*, in *Colonial Baptists Massachusetts and Rhode Island*, The Baptist Tradition (London: H. Hills, 1652; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1980), 51.

2. James Ireland, *The Life Of The Rev James Ireland* (1819 ed.), in *Esteemed Reproach The Lives of Reverend James Ireland and Reverend Joseph Craig*, ed., Keith Harper and C. Martin Jacumin (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 129.

3. Martin E. Marty, "Baptistification Takes Over," *Christianity Today* (September 2, 1983): 33.

4. Roger Williams, *Queries of the Highest Consideration* (London: n.p., 1646), 1.

5. John Leland, "Short Essays on Government," in *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, ed. L. F. Greene (New York: G. W. Wood, 1845), 476.



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