‘Render unto Caesar’ : Baptists and their relationship with the State

Prepared by Marita Munro, Whitley College
23-07-2018

From their very beginnings over 400 years ago, Baptists have affirmed the separation of church and state. This belief was the natural outworking of their strong conviction about freedom of conscience. While Baptists hold many beliefs in common with other Christian and Protestant groups (being strongly influenced by the 16th Century Protestant Reformation), their views about liberty and separation of church and state have tended to set them apart from other churches. A brief historical sketch may shed some light on the matter.

Baptists had much in common with the Sixteenth Century Anabaptists (Radical Reformers) who challenged Protestant and Catholic practices, established communities of faith based on believers’ baptism, (mostly) rejected the use of weapons and advocated separation of church and state. Thousands of Anabaptists were forced into exile or martyred by Protestants and Catholics alike for their convictions.

Baptists emerged during the early Seventeenth Century when leaders of Church and State strongly believed that political stability depended upon religious uniformity. In other words, citizens should believe what they were told to believe and worship according to a set pattern, imposed by the State. The Monarch (from the time of King Henry VIII) was viewed as the Head of the Church. The authorities also argued that the Church (religion) needed the support of the State. King James I’s introduction of the Law of Conformity, early in the 17th Century made life very difficult for those who dissented from the Established Church. Known as radical Puritans, they wanted to ‘purify’ the church of Roman Catholic practices, free citizens from State-imposed clerical laws, form their own covenanted congregations and appoint their own pastors. From among these Separatist groups the first Baptists emerged. Forced to leave England to seek religious freedom in Holland, they began to worship, baptize and organize their church as they believed God was directing them through Scripture. Their leaders included a former Anglican priest, John Smyth and an influential lawyer and layman, Thomas Helwys, who founded the first Baptist Church on English soil at Spitalfields, London in 1612 Smyth, Helwys and other Baptist leaders went on to write about liberty of conscience and religious freedom for all (not just for themselves).

Here are just two examples:

‘The magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion or doctrine, but to leave Christian religion free, to every man’s conscience...for Christ only is the King, and lawgiver of the church and conscience’ (John Smyth, 1612)

Thomas Helwys went even further in his letter addressed to King James 1:
‘Let them be heretics (included Catholics), Turks (ie Muslims), Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them’ (1612).

These views put the Baptists in a minority in a society with an established church and a monarchy who believed strongly in the Divine Right of Kings and the Bishops. Baptists placed limits on the State’s jurisdiction. While it could rightfully expect obedience from its subjects, the State could not compel individuals to believe against their conscience. Helwys earned a long prison sentence in London’s Newgate Prison for his convictions.

These early Baptists appealed for toleration towards the Jews and for their return to England from which they have been expelled centuries earlier.

Throughout the 17th Century the pendulum swung backwards and forwards between the easing of restrictions for Dissenters under Oliver Cromwell’s Commonwealth and their repression with the restoration of the English monarchy under Charles II which saw the ‘Great Ejection’ of clergy who did not conform to the Established Church’s 1662 Act of Uniformity. A limited degree of religious liberty was finally granted to Dissenters with the sealing of the 1689 Edict of Toleration. This followed a bloodless revolution that saw the overthrow of Charles II’s successor, James II, and the ascent to the English throne of Protestant rulers, William and Mary of Orange (Holland). Repression of Roman Catholics however, would continue for a very long time to come.

The spiritual convictions underpinning Baptist views were based on their study of Scripture, particularly the New Testament:

1. Almighty God is Lord of the Conscience. Each person stands in a unique and sacred relationship with God. Every individual will one day need to give account of himself/herself before God the Judge.
2. The State (Civil authorities) has a legitimate sphere of authority – but it has no role in the church or the spiritual sphere
3. Jesus Christ alone is the Lord of the Church
4. Faith is a free gift from God. It cannot be forced. Faith involves a free autonomous act of obedience to Jesus as Lord.

These convictions led to diversity rather than uniformity among Baptists; they also led to divisions. It was not simply a case of anything goes however, because Baptists appealed to Scripture as illuminated by the Holy Spirit for their ultimate authority.

Baptists have expressed their spiritual convictions in different ways throughout history. For example:

1. A rejection of infant baptism and an affirmation of believers’ baptism as a symbol of conversion, identification with Christ in his death and resurrection and entry into the Body of Christ, the Church.
3. Freedom to interpret Scripture for themselves without dependence upon external authorities.
4. Freedom to meet together for worship, to order their church life as they see fit and appoint their own pastors, teachers, deacons and elders (ie autonomy of the local church)

5. Freedom to preach, teach, learn, engage in mission and evangelism while respecting the freedom of others to believe or not to believe

Over time, further expressions would come to the fore, shaped by different political and religious contexts and the relative numerical strength of Baptists in various parts of the world.

Today, Baptists are the world’s largest Protestant denomination and the third largest Christian Church (after Roman Catholics and the Orthodox). It was estimated that in 2005 there were 48 million Baptist members and more than 150 million worshippers in Baptist churches. The United States has the greatest number and variety of Baptists largely because of Baptist convictions about freedom and independence. Outside of North America, significant Baptist communities exist in Russia, Romania, Korea, Myanmar (Burma), Brazil, India and Nigeria.

Baptist life in North American began in the 1630s.

Those Separatists who left England for the American colonies, to escape religious bigotry and a corrupt establishment were shocked to discover the same spirit of intolerance in ‘New England’, this time at the hands of a Puritan (Congregationalist) establishment. Roger Williams and later John Clarke, English pastors were particular targets for their wrath.

Williams, America’s first Baptist, originally an Anglican minister, had left England in 1631 in protest at corruption in his church. In Massachusetts, he challenged the authority of civil authorities in spiritual matters and especially Puritans’ illegal occupation of Indigenous land. Following a trial and banishment, he formed the first Baptist church on American soil at Providence, Rhode Island. Williams argued for complete religious liberty for all, a soul freedom, safeguarded by the separation of church and state and condemned the shedding of blood in religious wars, arguing that Scripture opposed religious persecution on the grounds of conscience.

In 1663 John Clarke, a Cambridge lawyer, Baptist minister, doctor and political theorist, secured Rhode Island’s Charter, enshrining religious liberty. Founder of the 2nd Baptist Church on American soil, he appealed to the English Parliament in the hope of leveraging religious freedom in New England. He wanted the Puritans delivered from their false zeal for God which led to what he called “soul murdering.” Both Williams and Clarke contributed to an ethos of growing religious toleration in the American colonies.

Baptists (and Methodists) flourished in the 18th Century evangelical revival in North America. With religious fervor went opposition to restraint upon religious expression. Baptist contemporaries, Isaac Backus and John Leland led a campaign for the separation of church and state. They envisaged the state as a secular institution which had no right to intervene in the affairs of the churches. Children of the optimistic Age of Enlightenment (Modernity) that laid new stress on individual freedom and responsibility, their context was one of heady revolution (American Wars of Independence). Backus objected to state taxes imposed for the
construction of Congregational Church meeting houses, and helped to tear down the Anglican establishment in Virginia. Leland was said to have influenced the framers of the American Constitution, writing: ‘Government has no more to do with the religious opinions of men than with the principles of mathematics’. The 1st Amendment of the Constitution of the US disallowed state government from tampering with religion and religious institutions, and disallowed any religion from dominating the government:

19th Century Baptists in England struggled to overcome the impact of state policies that did not encourage religious liberty. Conscious of their exclusion from the privileges enjoyed by members of the established church, many Baptists becoming involved in anti-slavery campaigns even though they themselves suffered religious grievances. Some turned their attention to the question of the union of church and state, believing that an established church was undesirable and launched the British anti-state church association, renamed in 1853, the Liberation Society to express their concerns about state interference in religion, commerce and trade, and state aid in education that privileged the Church of England.

While Baptists are not a creedal people, they have written Confessions/Statements of Faith to express their convictions and consensus of opinion at a particular time and place. Every one includes a statement about religious liberty and the role of the State. Some were written from the perspective of Baptists who enjoy the fruits of democratic societies without an Established Church (as in Australia and the USA). Others were penned by Baptists experiencing the harsh realities of religious, ecclesiastical and/or political tyranny.

The Southern Baptist Convention’s (SBC) The Baptist Faith and Message (1925, 1963,2000) states that God is Lord of the Conscience, spells out the State’s role in protecting the church, and ensuring full freedom in the pursuit of its spiritual ends. The State cannot privilege one denomination over another nor is the Church to use the State for its own work (Articles 6, 17). America’s Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s (CBF) Guiding Principles underline the freedom and responsibility of all Christians to relate directly to God without imposition of creed or control by clergy or government, and the separation of church and state, concluding: ‘We believe in freedom of religion, freedom for religion and freedom from religion’. European Baptists’ 1992 Statement of Identity’s article on separation of church and state is based on the sole lordship of Jesus Christ and concern for religious liberty. Like the SBC Article, the State is not to involve itself in church matters or privilege one group of believers or non-believers over another. Baptists are encouraged to be responsible citizens, actively participating where appropriate in political processes, exercising a prophetic voice when the State acts against God’s intentions or supporting the State when it acts in line with God’s purposes (Articles 11, 22).

The Baptist Union of Victoria’s Principles and Ideals of the Baptist Faith identifies Christ’s Lordship of the Church as the sole authority in all matters of faith and conduct in the life of the Church and the individual, and guarantor of liberty of thought and conscience for believer and Church, freed from any ecclesiastical or external authority.

1939 saw the coming together of three of the largest Baptist Conventions in North America (American, Southern Baptist and National) to make pronouncements called the American Baptist Bill of Rights which provided a watch-dog surveillance on matters of church-state
relations. It emerged in an international context that saw the rise of fascist governments and dictatorships in Europe. The body later known as the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (1946) fostered research and public education into matters of religious liberty and the separation of church and state.

But with the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in 1979, has come a noticeable shift in its attitudes towards the State. Fundamentalist Baptists (such as Rev Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority) began to enter the realms of politics and public policy during the 1970s. Falwell’s policy was to recapture America for God and he headed a coalition of Baptists, Roman Catholics, Jews and others. Ronald Reagan’s appearance on the platform at the annual SBC delegates’ gathering at the beginning of the 1980s was tantamount to a public endorsement of his presidential campaign. In 1991 The SBC withdrew funding from the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, an action reflecting a shift in the historical understanding of religious freedom among Baptists. William Brackney observed that many modern Baptists were more concerned with the creation of ‘a Christian America’ than with the preservation of certain religious freedoms. Many made the case for Christian (Baptist) involvement in government while rejecting the role of government in the church (especially in the area of education). Some neglected state accreditation requirements or refused admission to non-white students whilst retaining tax exemption status.

In 2004 the SBC’s piece de resistance was its decision to withdraw from the international community of Baptists represented by the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), established in 1905, citing doctrinal and structural differences. Southern Baptists had been an integral part of the BWA since its foundation. Having identified freedom of conscience as a fundamental Baptist conviction, the BWA surveyed the political realm for evidences of violation of religious liberty and worked to support Baptists in parts of the world expressing oppression or active discrimination. A key BWA objective, defined in 1947 and revised in 1975 states:

‘[To] Act to further uphold for all people the claims of fundamental human rights and to further and maintain full religious liberty everywhere, both for our constituent churches and all other religious faiths’.

Confronted by a host of human rights abuses at the beginning of the 21s Century, then General Secretary of the BWA, Denton Lotz declared: ‘The Baptist idea of religious freedom enshrined in the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights is under threat as never before’.

In comparison to other parts of the world, the Australian Baptist community is quite small, yet growing, influenced by various and often divergent developments among Baptists in Britain and North America. Australian Baptists are organized along state lines and the majority belong to State Baptist Unions, such as the Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV).

Australia has no established church. Governor Bourke’s Church Acts (1836-7) gave the main denominations equity before the law, with both buildings and clergy salaries subsidized by the State. They were designed to promote the role of the Christian Churches in a young European settlement beset with a host of social problems and to avoid the problem besetting Great Britain of an Established Church. Christian denominations could receive state funding
(in proportion to their numerical size). For Baptists and Congregationalists, this posed a theological dilemma. Didn’t accepting State aid contravene a fundamental spiritual conviction about the separation of church and state?

Baptists exercised their freedom in this matter; some accepted aid; others did not. While many Baptists supported the Revd J. Dunmore Lang’s strenuous campaign to abolish this aid during the 1840s, they accepted aid for building between 1837 and 1842, including land for their church building in Collins Street, Melbourne. But the issue of state aid remained contentious among Baptists.

As private donations increased, state aid was gradually phased out, from churches by 1870, and from church schools in 1872, completing the separation of church and state.

The creators of the Australian Constitution were resistant to the idea of government legislating for the establishment and regulation of religion (faith). The Constitution’s Preamble contains a reference to ‘Almighty God’ and in the Constitution itself, religious freedom is guaranteed and discrimination on the grounds of religion is rejected. The Constitution underpins a pluralistic society in which Australian people are free to espouse any number of religious views or none at all.

In his analysis of the secularization of western public institutions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Hugh McLeod observed the tendency of governments to extend their powers into areas formerly controlled by churches such as education and welfare. This was primarily in response to demands for equity between religious communities; and/or because the state has better resources. This extension of power can also be seen in the way governments deliberately assign churches a significant role in education, welfare and immigration to foster social harmony, civic virtue and national morale. McLeod’s analysis is borne out in the Victorian Baptist experience.

During the 1950s Baptists recognized how much they benefited from state aid: rates exemptions on church buildings, land grants for free or token amounts, long leases for low rentals, building grants for kindergarten halls and operational subsidies for day kindergartens. The BUV’s 1954 Report recognized that the church and the state were living and expanding, related entities with specific duties. It acknowledged that historically Baptists had applied their principles variously, according to prevailing conditions. They had co-operated with the state for the good of society, without adverse consequences in several areas.

Victorian Baptists argued that increased co-operation between church and state was in the interests of a more democratic society. The church could positively contribute to society’s moral and spiritual values in light of the secular educational system’s failure so to do. While taxing citizens for the support of various partisan religious views involved ethical dilemmas, it could be justified on the basis of Baptist belief in ‘soul liberty’: ‘the right to worship God or not – according to the dictates of (a person’s) conscience, and to propagate that faith’. Fairness demanded that: ‘we must grant that right to others’. Baptists formulated a response that affirmed several key convictions earlier outlined. They were counselled to reject complete separation from the state and to be open to state initiatives. State aid that did not compromise the church’s freedom, was equally open to other groups, and used for functions for which the state could not afford to provide, was seen as acceptable. At the 1960 Assembly, Baptists agreed to approve the affiliation of Whitley College: the Baptist College of Victoria with the
University of Melbourne and to accept grants from the Australian Universities Commission. By 1961 almost half their pre-school centres, were receiving government subsidies.

The relationship between the church and the state was further complicated by the return of state aid during the 1960s under the Menzies Federal Government. Capital grants for science laboratories and libraries were followed by per capita grants for running costs for denominational schools.

Victoria was the only Australian state in which Baptists operated their own schools. While in other states Baptists affirmed the doctrine of the separation of church and state, and expressed concern about Catholics receiving the bulk of state aid, in Victoria the denomination was more divided. The repackaging of state aid as a response to a ‘national need’ enabled some churches to overcome their previous opposition, although considerable doubts remained. Opponents to state aid eventually capitulated and the nature of the relationship between the schools and the church was changed as a result. Valuing as they did the role of education in forming society’s citizens and leaders, Victorian Baptists were prepared to accept significant government funding, recognizing that if they wanted their schools to retain a competitive edge, they had little choice. For some Baptists, this decision represented the ‘thin end of the wedge’.

The provision of welfare also involved Baptists in increasingly close co-operation with government, but again this co-operation brought major challenges. The complexities of providing care for disadvantaged groups caused some Baptists to reassess their traditional approaches and explore new pathways. Individuals and congregations coming from a social justice perspective identified unmet needs and developed services to fill the gap. But welfare services based on a committed volunteer base, were not necessarily equipped to respond professionally to a range of community needs. Baptists were challenged by the demands posed by compliance with the state in standards of care and professionalization of their workforce including wages policies. Without state aid it would have been impossible for Baptists to provide the bulk of their welfare services, yet the acceptance of such funding could create tensions. Initially such services saw possibilities for expansion when governments recognized as priority areas the needs that they were serving. However, the lure of government funding altered the shape of the services and, while state funding represented considerable savings for successive governments, increasing government regulation also brought additional costs and involved compromise for Baptists.

Did Baptists compromise their theological identity with the acceptance of government money and the associated rise in levels of bureaucracy and management? A simple, unqualified ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to these questions is simply not possible. If Baptists were to engage meaningfully with a changing society, and not be relegated to a place of irrelevance, they were compelled to accept government funding whilst recognizing the challenges this represented.

By the beginning of the 3rd millennium however, this interaction had been greatly extended. It was now accepted wisdom that Baptists could not maintain their involvement in welfare and education without significant state aid.

Like all other religious bodies, Australian Baptists are required to comply with the laws of the land in an increasing number of areas: property management, government funding, taxation, marriage registration, insurance cover, privacy and duty of care. Evidence of sexual misconduct among clergy and denominational leaders surfacing during the late 1980s tested the
effectiveness of Baptist structures, leadership and beliefs at a time when the state began demanding greater accountability from the churches. Procedures and protocols now abound – a necessary and welcome shift! The Baptist Union of Victoria’s Code of Conduct with which all its accredited/ordained Pastoral Leaders must comply includes clear statements about Baptists’ moral and legal responsibilities and duties.35

Baptist relationships with the state are complex.

The most recent changes to the Federal government’s marriage legislation to allow for the legal union of same-sex couples has caused a furore among Australia Baptists with the majority opposed to the changes. Many Australian Baptist pastors are marriage celebrants which is not the case in several other countries where clergy are not permitted to conduct weddings. Some Australian Baptists have argued for the separation of the legal and spiritual roles on the basis of their convictions about the separation of church and state. Concerned that the proposed Marriage Act changes might compel Baptist celebrants to go against their conscience and conduct same-sex marriage, Victorian Baptists voted in 2017 to disallow their pastors from conducting such marriages. In protest, some Baptist pastors relinquished their rights to perform marriages.

Conclusion

Baptists have interpreted the separation of church and state variously depending upon their socio-political context. In Australia, social change, institutional evolution and secularization involved connections with the State, but such co-operation inevitably involved tension between basic guiding principles and pragmatic decision making.

---

4 Michael E Williams and Walter B Shurden, eds., Turning Points in Baptist History (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), chap. 3
5 Pierard, ed., Baptists Together in Christ, 301.
7 General and Particular Baptists, Strict and Particular. Independent Baptists. The list goes on.
8 The following section on Baptists in America is based on McBeth, Source book for Baptist Heritage
10 Ibid.
12 William Brackney, 106
14 Ibid., chap. 10
16 British and American Baptist Historiography is extensive. For example, see Ian M. Randall, *The English Baptists of the Twentieth Century* (Didcot, OX: The Baptist Historical Society, 2005); Paul Beasley Murray, *Radical Believers* (The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1992).
24 Jack Manning to Cliff Thompson, 3 July 1952, State Aid to Church Schools Folder, BUV Archives, Camberwell, Vic.
25 ‘Report of Committee of Baptist Union appointed by direction of 1951 Annual Assembly to consider the above matter,’ State Aid to Church Schools Folder.
26 Such as the appointment of military, immigration and university chaplains.
27 Already happening in broadcasting.
28 ‘Report of Committee of Baptist Union appointed by direction of 1951 Annual Assembly to consider the above matter,’ 3, State Aid to Church Schools Folder.
29 BUV Assembly Minutes, 1960.
31 Gregory *Church and State*, 228–34.
32 Revd Frank Stone to Rev. Geoffrey Blackburn, 14 February 1964, Church and State, File, BUV Archives
34 *Victorian Baptist Witness*, 5 June 1964, 2.
35 Baptist Union of Victoria, *Code of Conduct – Companion* (January 2016)