

Rafał Prostack

University of Economics in Cracow, Poland

ORCID: 0000-0002-4772-4597

Credobaptism and religious policy. Separation of church and state, freedom of religion, and religious tolerance in the writings of the early Baptists¹

Abstract: The aim of the article is to reconstruct the relationships between the Baptist understanding of baptism (credobaptism; believer's baptism) and church and the religious policy promoted by the early Baptists. The following texts are explored: *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1612) by Thomas Helwys; *Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned* (1615) by John Murton; and *Religious Peace: Or, a Plea for Liberty of Conscience* (1614) by Leonard Busher. Helwys and Murton were leaders of the congregation of Spitalfields, the first Baptist community in the Kingdom of England. Busher, lesser known, probably belonged to the congregation, and his said work is the first treaty to defend freedom of religion by a Baptist.

Keywords: Baptists, separation of church and state, freedom of religion

Abstrakt: Celem niniejszego opracowania jest rekonstrukcja związków między baptystycznym rozumieniem chrztu i Kościoła a polityką wyznaniową promowaną przez pierwszych baptystów – przez Thomasa Helwysa [autora *A Short Declaration of the Misery of Iniquity* (1612)] i Johna Murtona [autora *Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned* (1615)], liderów kongregacji ze Spitalfields, pierwszej wspólnoty baptystycznej w Królestwie Anglii, oraz, nieco mniej znanego, Leonarda Bushera, który najpewniej do tej wspólnoty należał, a którego *Religion's Peace; a Plea for Liberty of Conscience* (1614) jest pierwszym traktatem w obronie wolności religijnej autorstwa baptysty.

Słowa kluczowe: baptyzm, rozdział Kościoła od państwa, wolność religijna

¹ The paper was elaborated with the preparation of a monograph entitled *Ogród murem oddzielony od pustyni. Relacje państwo-Kościół, wolność sumienia i tolerancja religijna w myśli pierwszych baptystów*.

Introduction

We are used to perceiving credobaptism² as a central element of the Baptist doctrine, defining the Baptist understanding of the Church (Body of Christ). We treat it with less concern as the basis of the Baptist reserve for the idea of state church, as the source of the postulate for the separation of church and state, and as a rationale for freedom of religion and religious tolerance.

We recognize Thomas Helwys, John Murton, and Leonard Busher as advocates of freedom of religion and uncompromising opponents of the Church of England, and perceive Roger Williams, Isaac Backus, and John Leland as defenders of religious tolerance and relentless enemies of the established state church on the American soil. However, in Poland, the actual relationships between credo-baptism and the religious policy promoted by Baptists still remain, if not unexplored, undoubtedly a grateful field of investigation.

The aim of the paper is to reconstruct the relationships between the Baptist understanding of baptism and church and the religious policy promoted by the early Baptists: Thomas Helwys (author of *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, 1612) and John Murton (author of *Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned*, 1615), leaders of the congregation of Spitalfields, the first Baptist community in the Kingdom of England, and, lesser known, Leonard Busher, who probably belonged to the congregation, and whose *Religious Peace: Or, a Plea for Liberty of Conscience* (1614) is the first treaty to defend freedom of religion by a Baptist. The above-mentioned treaties were an important voice in the discourse on freedom of religion in the pre-revolutionary England. Their significance was appreciated by successive generations of advocates of religious tolerance and separation of church and state on both sides of the Atlantic. Although we rarely refer to them in the reality of modern demoliberalism, it is well worth constantly reminding about the contribution of early Baptists to the work of building a world in which oppression and persecution for religious beliefs are not legally permissible.

1. Early Baptists. From Smyth's se-baptism to Thomas Helwys' community

At the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries, Amsterdam was home to many Brownists: nonconformist, separatist puritan communities who rejected the possibility to structurally, ritually, and doctrinally submit to the English state church, the

² The practice of baptizing only those who consciously profess their faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Saviour; the practice commonly called believer's baptism. Credobaptism stands in opposition to paedobaptism, the practice of baptizing infants.

Church of England.³ Amsterdam also became an asylum for John Smyth's church (1570?-1612?), founded in 1606 in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire. Smyth, a graduate from Christ's College of University of Cambridge, which at the time was considered a breeding ground for Puritan ideas, accepted Anglican ordination in 1594 from an Anglican bishop, but only three years later became known as a person openly criticizing the Anglican liturgy as lacking any evangelical basis. In his views, Smyth originally remained in the mainstream of the Puritan Reformation, declaring his loyalty to the state church and expecting its imminent profound reform. The situation changed in response to the issuing of royal proclamations by James I in 1604; these imposed an obligation on all clergy in the kingdom to acknowledge the authenticity of the doctrine described in the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion* and to base the liturgical order and other ceremonies on the *Book of Common Prayer*. Having rejected the possibility to submit to the royal will and, at the same time, having abandoned false hopes for a thorough reform of the Church of England, Smyth's community finally decided to emigrate. At the turn of 1607 and 1608, they reached Amsterdam, feeding the Ancient Church, a separatist community led by Francis Johnson (Smyth's tutor during his studies in Cambridge). For about a year, the two communities remained united, and then their paths parted. The reasons for the division were mainly issues related to the Ancient Church's structure and financial management. Johnson retained for himself the exclusive right to preach the Word and the actual congregation leadership. The reasons for the parting were presented by Smyth in the treaty *The Differences of the Churches*. In short, Johnson's leadership was for Smyth a manifestation of 'Presbyterian tendencies', for which he found no basis in the Scripture [Tudur Jones, Long, Moore (eds.) 2007: 116;

³ The widespread dissatisfaction with the progress of the 'deatholicization' of the Church of England during the reign of Elizabeth I became a ground for the rise of a religious and social movement described as Puritanism. While some Puritans expected a profound reform of the national church, others expressed their conviction of its structural and functional inability to finally purify of the remains of the 'papist' tradition. The latter were called separatists as they decided to separate from the state church, establishing independent churches, made up of individuals who entered into a covenant among themselves before God, in response to God's covenant with His chosen people – as the one created by Robert Browne in Norwich in 1579. The beginning of separatism is usually considered to be the publication of two pamphlets by Browne in 1582 in Middelburg, the Netherlands: *A Treatise of Reformation without Tarrying for Anie* and *A Booke Which Sheweth the Life and Manners of All True Christians*. The former addressed the reform of the Church as an entity free from the influence of political power; the latter raised the need to adopt an ecclesial structure based on the autonomy of individual communities of believers (churches). Browne's impact was so significant that separatists were popularly referred to as Brownists. Although Browne himself returned to the Church of England several years later, and even accepted Anglican ordination in 1591, he started a process that led to permanent divisions in the Puritan community [White 1971: 53–63].

Burgess 1911: 139]. In the dispute over a well-organized church structure, Smyth was supported by Thomas Helwys (1575?–1616?) and John Murton (1585–1626).

In 1609, Smyth took a radical step, an act of se-baptism, prompted by his questioning of the evangelical nature of not only the English state church, but also the Brownist communities, as a result of his reflections on the essence of baptism. He argued that the Church of England was a political creation of the English monarchy and, as such, could not claim to participate in the Body of Christ. Consequently, baptism in this ‘false church’ was not a testimony of adherence to Christ in His church [Burgess 1911: 146]. At the same time, Smyth related the issue of true Church with the baptism of infants, unable to confirm their faith in God’s Revelation. He described his position in the treaty *The Character of the Beast, or, the False Constitution of the Church* (1609). The text reflects the meanders of his personal journey in search of the authentic Church, which, in his opinion, was neither the Church of England nor the separatist churches, including his own community. For it is not the apostolic succession, whose preservation is declared by the English state church, that determines the validity of its claim to be a church. Nor is it based on a spiritual covenant, along with the concept of covenant succession, with its doctrine based on Acts 2,39 and 1 Corinthians 7,14, made by Brownists, responding to God’s call to the chosen ones of the human race, who, when forming the church, vow to be faithful and obedient to Him and to be devoted, caring and merciful to one another. The Church of England and separatist communities, with all the obvious differences between them, are characterized by the baptism of children, which makes them ‘churches of the flesh’ instead of ‘churches of the Spirit’. Baptism of infants constitutes incorporation into the Church like circumcision of a Jewish boy: an Old Testament act testifying to his being chosen, to his participation in God’s covenant with the House of Israel, to marking him with ‘God’s seal’. Yet God’s covenant with the House of Israel was unique, essentially unrepeatable. The Church of Christ, His mystical Body is ‘the children of the promise’, not ‘children by physical descent’ (Romans 9,8); one has to believe in this promise to be included among the sons of God. The practice of baptism of infants does not fulfil its function, which is to mark a Christian aware of their faith with ‘God’s seal’.⁴ Therefore, the true Church of Christ is the one made

⁴ In Colossians 2,11–14, baptism was compared to circumcision. Although both are symbols of becoming a son, circumcision is a ritual ‘performed by human hands’ – in spite of being ordered by God to Abraham (Genesis 17,9–14). When baptized, you become ‘circumcised by Christ,’ ‘buried with him in baptism,’ and ‘raised with him through your faith in the working of God’ [Lee 2003, 145–152].

up exclusively of people who first believed and then let themselves be baptized (Mark 16,16); who, 'born of the Spirit', turned away from their sinful lives to lead a new life in Christ (John 3,1–21). The full and effective separation of the Brownists from the Church of England required, according to Smyth, the abandonment of the baptism of infants, to which he encouraged Puritan nonconformists in *The Character of the Beast, or, the False Constitution of the Church*.

Consciously confessing his faith in Christ in the Spirit and repenting for his sins, Smyth wished to receive a 'true' baptism of water in order to be included in the Church of 'the children of the promise'. Here came the obstacle because he could not find a right person to baptize him. With his radicalism, after a discussion with Thomas Helwys and the other members of his community, he decided to baptize himself, and then all those who remained with him after leaving the Ancient Church. The re-baptism of a group of English separatists, gathered around John Smyth, is considered to be the beginning of the Baptist movement, a new stream in the English Reformation. The act did not find understanding in the eyes of his contemporaries, including among the Puritan reformers of the Church of England or the Brownists, with whom he had remained in brotherhood until then.

After the se-baptism act, Smyth came close to the Anabaptist community of the Dutch Mennonites (the Waterlander community), who confirmed his belief in the effectiveness of baptism only for those who consciously professed their faith in Christ. Under their influence, he also abandoned the Calvinist teachings of double predestination, to accept the Arminian soteriology. But most importantly, he recognized the true Church in this community and was therefore able to be baptized in it. This fact confirms that the se-baptism did not free him from doubts about being effectively baptized in the Church of Christ, and thus also about his membership in it: baptism takes place in the Church, from the hands of a Church member. Applying for baptism from the Mennonites and consequently seeking admission to their community, having signed the *Waterlander Confession* in March 1610, together with about thirty members of his congregation [Jordan 1947: 189], Smyth questioned the effectiveness of his previous se-baptism and contested (again) the belonging of his Amsterdam community to the Body of Christ. This step led to a further division as Smyth was abandoned by those who remained convinced of the effectiveness of the baptism that they had received from the self-baptized Smyth and rejected his suggestion that they were still outside the Church. The group, comprising no more than ten people, was led by Thomas Helwys, supported by John Murton. Although they were a minority group – Smyth's

supporters numbered three times as many – they decided to excommunicate both Smyth and the others applying for membership in the Waterlander community.

In 1612, Helwys and his followers left Amsterdam and returned to their homeland, recognizing that escaping persecution was a mistake: lack of faith in God's providence [Burgess 1911: 276]. They settled in Spitalfields, which at the time was a northern suburb of London. In the same year, Smyth died of tuberculosis, and those who remained with him to the end found their new home in the Mennonite community – they were formally accepted only on 21 January 1615 [ibid.: 272]. This is how the turbulent but short history of the first English Baptist community in Amsterdam ended. Smyth's heritage is not only the creation of the first congregation, but also an attempt to indicate the doctrinal basis of the newly established religious movement, which we find in his *Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles* of 1609 [Tudur Jones, Long, Moore (eds.) 2007: 116–117].

To sum up this part, let us state the following with reference to early Baptists: (1) the Church of England and other denominations burdened with being 'churches of the flesh' do not constitute the mystical Body of Christ because (2) the Church is made up exclusively of individuals who voluntarily accept faith in God's Son, Lord, and Saviour and then receive baptism as a visible sign of belonging to Him and His Church; therefore, (3) the Church is not a community with such a universal and essentially inclusive membership as a society, which is bound by political affiliation, because only some voluntarily accept faith in God's Revelation. If the national state church is subjectively equated with the political society, and additionally practises infant baptism, for the Baptist it becomes a deed of the Antichrist. It is hard to imagine a better *casus belli* in the political reality of this era. In the kingdom of James I, Baptists became public enemies and the Baptist movement proved to be synonymous with anarchy. The uncompromising struggle for religious tolerance for infidels, strict distinction between Church and state, the demand for freedom to follow the voice of conscience as an indispensable condition for consciously and sincerely responding to the Spirit's call have become immanent elements of the Baptist doctrine and identity, Baptists' existential right and need.

2. Thomas Helwys as a spokesman of religious freedom

If we consider that Helwys and those who decided to return to England with him were followers of Smyth's work (before his attempt to join Waterlander), we will identify the moment of birth of the Baptist movement in the Islands and recognize Helwys as the second pioneer of this stream in the English Reformation. In 1612,

Helwys published a treaty entitled *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* [Helwys (ed. Groves) 1998], in which he presented the foundations of his worldview and, at the same time, called into question the King's right to define the truths of the Christian faith, since his power did not include the relationship between God and man. In his handwritten dedication on the copy sent to King James I, we find the following words:

Hear, O king, and despise not the counsel of the poor, and let their complaints come before thee. The king is a mortal man and not God, therefore has no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual lords over them. If the king has authority to make spirituals lords and laws, then he is an immortal God and not a mortal man. O king, be not seduced by deceivers to sin against God whom you ought to obey, nor against your poor subjects who ought and will obey you in all things with body, life, and goods, or else let their lives be taken from the earth. God save the king [Helwys (ed. Groves) 1998: xxiv].

Additionally, Helwys pointed out the mistakes of the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, as well as advocates of the reform of the English state church, including separatists, whom he accused of distorting evangelical teaching. Nevertheless, the important message of the treaty referred to the impotence of political authorities in matters of conscience and was a determined call for religious tolerance for all subjects of the King of England, regardless of their convictions. In the probably most frequently quoted passage of *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, which constitutes an extension of the dedication to King James I, we read:

For our lord the king is but an earthly king, and he has no authority as a king but in earthly causes. And if the king's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord the king can require no more. 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. Let them be heretic, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure [ibid.: 53].

In the future, Helwys' call for unconditional religious tolerance would become a hallmark of the Baptist movement, distinguishing it from other streams of the

English Reformation. The idea that tolerance would extend to Muslims, Judaists, and even ‘papists’ was a truly revolutionary one in the early 17th century. As Lecler observes, the treaty by Helwys is the first Protestant apology of religious freedom, of paramount significance in the history of England [Lecler 1964: 424]. The editor of the contemporary issue of *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, Groves, points out that Helwys presented the fundamental identifiers of the Baptist movement: the baptism of believers, the congregational structure of the Church, the individual right to read and seek understanding of the biblical text, and, which needs to be emphasized in the context of our deliberations, the postulate to separate church and state [Helwys (ed. Groves) 1998: xxxiv].⁵ Thus, one may risk a statement that the essentially political postulate, concerning, after all, the political order and religious policy of the state, has been present at the heart of the Baptist religious doctrine from the very beginning.

3. Freedom of conscience in the writings of John Murton and Leonard Busher

The response to the publication of *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* was appropriate for the era. Helwys was jailed in Newgate Prison, where he died in 1615 at the age of about 40. His London community survived the imprisonment and death of their leader, becoming a mother community for the churches of Lincoln, Coventry, Salisbury, and Tiverton, with a total of about 150 members [Chute, Finn, Haykin 2015: 20]. The London congregation was headed by John Murton [Jordan 1947: 194–195]. Murton matters to us all the more because he is author of an important treaty on freedom of religion written by a Baptist, namely *Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned* (1615).⁶ It was developed in the form of a conversation between an anti-Christian and a Christian, the former being a spokesman for the English state church, probably its bishop, and the latter illustrating a Baptist. Over time, the discussion includes an indifferent person, being convinced by the Christian that no one should be forced by earthly means to praise God: everybody can praise Him in a manner consistent with their own longing [Underhill 1846: 104–105] as praise conveyed from coercion will remain unacknowledged, and that which is derived from the spirit will be accepted [ibid.: 113]. *Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned* can be perceived as

⁵ Estep, in turn, presents Helwys as the one who incorporated the basic concepts of his mentor, John Smyth, into what was correctly called the first Baptist confession of faith [Estep 1985: 32].

⁶ The text of *Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned* can be found in: Underhill 1846: 95–180. As in the case of *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, the addressee of *Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned* is James I.

a re-exposure of Helwys' theses from *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, and above all as an attempt of an apparently hopeless struggle for his release. The freedom that Murton deals with, similarly to Helwys' lecture on the issue, is not the freedom to seek what is good for man or beneficial in his capricious judgment, but constitutes the freedom to follow the voice of conscience, shaped by God's Spirit, without any pressure from others. It is worth noting at this point that Murton also defends Catholics – despite his sincere aversion to their doctrine and, obviously, the institution of the Roman Catholic Church – whose situation in England was particularly difficult after the Gunpowder Plot had been discovered and who reached for violence, as the author argued, as a result of a violation of conscience [ibid.: 114–116].

In turn, in *An Humble Supplication to the King's Majesty* – a text complementing the *Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned* – Murton presents an argument in favour of religious tolerance resembling the one used by Helwys, who referred King James I to the Gospel of Luke. Murton employed various passages of the Gospel and the apostolic lesson from 1 Corinthians.

But he charged straitly, that his disciples should be so far from persecuting those that would not be of their religion, that when they were persecuted they should pray; when they were cursed, they should bless. The reason is, because they that are now tares may hereafter become wheat; they who are now blind, may hereafter see; they that now resist him, may hereafter receive him; they that are now in the devil's snare, in adverseness to the truth, may hereafter come to repentance; they that are now blasphemers, persecutors, and oppressors, as Paul was, may in time become faithful; they that are now idolaters, as the Corinthians once were, may hereafter become true worshippers as they; they that are now no people of God, nor under mercy, as the saints sometimes were, may hereafter become the people of God, and obtain mercy, as they. Some come not till the eleventh hour: if those that come not till the last hour should be destroyed because they came not at the first, then should they never come, but be prevented. And why do men call themselves Christians, and do not the things Christ would? [ibid.: 215].

The reference to sword and fire in the work of conversion stands in the way of the Spirit's action in the conscience of the converts, the only reliable way to renew sincerely the life of Christ's follower, to a genuine sorrow for sin, and to

a true conversion. In turn, the loss of infidels already ‘early in the morning’ is, for Murton, a barrier to the action of Grace in those who would potentially open themselves to it, even if only at ‘five in the afternoon’ (Matthew 20,1–16).

Leonard Busher, whose treaty entitled *Religion’s Peace; a Plea for Liberty of Conscience*⁷ opens an anthology of texts on freedom of conscience by Underhill, was most likely among those who, together with Helwys and Murton, returned from Amsterdam to their homeland, and co-founded the Baptist community of Spitalfields [ibid.: 5; Barclay 1877: 98; Massons 1896: 102].⁸ His work was published a year after *Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned* by Murton and two years after *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* by Helwys. Still, it should be remembered that the primary purpose of Helwys’ treaty was to expose and defend his religious doctrine, of which the appeal for universal religious tolerance was only a constituent part. Consequently, it is the treaty by Busher that we should consider as the earliest work by a Baptist entirely devoted to freedom of religion [Underhill 1846: 6]. As in the case of texts by Helwys and Murton, the addressee of *Religious Peace: Or, a Plea for Liberty of Conscience* is James I, called by Busher for dissident tolerance. The other addressees are members of Parliament. Since it is Busher that should be treated with priority, let us quote some longer passages of his work as his remarks do make it worth noticing:

Therefore may it please your majesty and parliament to understand that, by fire and sword, to constrain princes and peoples to receive that one true religion of the gospel, is wholly against the mind and merciful law of Christ, dangerous both to king and state, a means to decrease the kingdom of Christ, and a means to increase the kingdom of antichrist (...). [P]ersecution is a work well pleasing to all false prophets and bishops, but it is contrary to the mind of Christ, *who came not to judge and destroy men’s lives, but to save them*. And though some men and women believe not a the first hour, yet may they at the eleventh hour, if they be not persecuted to death before. And no king nor bishop

⁷ The full text of *Religious Peace: Or, a Plea for Liberty of Conscience* can be found in: Underhill 1846: 15–81.

⁸ In turn, Champlin Burrage maintains that Busher belonged to the third faction of Smyth’s congregation, which emerged after the crisis following his request for baptism and membership in Waterlander. So, three groups would have been formed: that of Smyth, the one of Helwys, and the third one, with the participation of Busher, who neither applied to join the Amsterdam Mennonite community nor returned to England in 1612 with Helwys’ group [Burrage 1912: 243–244].

can, or is able to command faith; *That is the gift of God, who worketh in us both the will and the deed of his oxen good pleasure (...)*. And as kings and bishops cannot command the wind, so they cannot command faith; *and as the wind bloweth where it listeth, so is every man that is born of the Spirit*. You may force men to church against their consciences, but they will believe as they did afore, when they come there; for God giveth a blessing only to his own ordinance, and abhorreth antichrist's [ibid.: 17–18].

The reference to reason as being decisive for the wrongfulness of actions against dissidents allows us to perceive Busher as a participant in the historical process of articulating natural and inalienable subjective rights, which not only are based on the merciful law of Christ, but also remain reasonable, which will be the primary argument for their recognition in the Age of Enlightenment. Busher does not employ the notion of natural law; however, natural reasoning, which is inscribed in the arguments inherent in natural law, is for him an ally of the biblical text and theological rationale.

In his argumentation in favour of religious tolerance, Busher also applies an example from outside the Christian world, which was a thoroughly provocative remark.

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, 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 believe Mahomet's law.' Also I read that Jews, Christians, and Turks, are tolerated in Constantinople, and yet are peaceable, though so contrary the one to the other. If this be so, how much more ought Christians not to force one another to religion? And how much more ought Christians to tolerate Christians, when as the Turks do tolerate them? Shall we be less merciful than the Turks? Or shall we learn the Turks to persecute Christians? It is not only unmerciful, but unnatural and abominable; yea, monstrous for one Christian to vex and destroy another for difference and questions of religion [ibid.: 24].

This argument cannot be denied logic. Nevertheless, presenting the king of a Christian nation as less merciful than the Muslims of Constantinople and as

cruel as the bishop of Rome was not only a provocation but also an obvious impertinence for the addressee of these words.

A common point for *Religious Peace: Or, a Plea for Liberty of Conscience, A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity and Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned* is to stress the impotence of the earthly authority in matters of faith, for the 'government of souls' belongs to another 'Kingdom'. Busher reminds the reader:

Kings and magistrates are to rule temporal affairs by the swords of their temporal kingdoms, and bishops and minister are to rule spiritual affairs by the word and Spirit of God, the sword of Christ's spiritual kingdom, and not to intermeddle one with another's authority, office, and function. And it is a great shame for the bishops and minister not to be able to rule in their church, without the assistance of the king and magistrate; yea, it is a great sign they are none of Christ's bishops and ministers. If they were, they would not be afraid nor ashamed of their faith; nor yet would they persuade princes and people to persecute, and force one another to believe them; but would use only the assistance of God's word and Spirit, and therewith suffer their faith and doctrine to be examined, proved, and disputed, both by word and writing [ibid.: 23].

We found this separatist argument in Helwys, emphasizing its importance in the Baptist doctrine, in whose construction Busher occupies his rightful, significant place. For a state to be a state and the Church to be the Church, the bishop cannot support himself on the authority of an earthly ruler. In this way, he would testify to the weakness of his spirit. The 'sword' of faith is the Word and the Spirit of God, not the law of the state, defining the rights and duties of its subjects.

In 1624, the London Baptist community of Spitalfields experienced a serious crisis, which most likely affected its fate, as well as that of the other four churches affiliated with it. A group of sixteen people, led by Elias Tookey, whose members John Murton accused of Anabaptism, left the community involuntarily. Two years later, Murton died, and his congregation probably did not survive the death of the leader, as there is no evidence of its activity after 1626.

Conclusions

Underhill, in his introductory word to the anthology of texts on religious freedom of the English Reformation, presents Baptists as uncompromising advocates

of the Church as a community of 'saints' who are united by faith, not by the pressure of 'sword and fire'; a Church in which doctrine, ritual, or hierarchy are not determined by any ordinance, for they were not authorized or commanded by Jesus or His Apostles. The church, made up of 'saints,' leaves the unregenerated outside. In the Church understood in this way, there is no place for secular interference, for the intervention of secular law or subjection because only the Spirit shapes its form, acting in the believers through the Word. The teachings of the fathers of Reformation and the Church of England – who did not give up the possibility to use 'external instruments' in the act of the 'inner transformation' of a person marked with a 'seal' on the day of baptism, confirming Church affiliation – remained in tension with this definition of the mystical Body of Christ [Underhill 1846: lxxiv-lxxv]. The church of people baptized without the participation of their will turns out to be a false church, growing by the power of man (baptizing an unconverted person, in accordance with their own discretion), not by the Spirit of God. The false church gathers people willing to follow their own paths instead of following, with God's help, the path of truth and justice. Therefore, the oppressive intervention of the magistrate – involved in the operation of a false church – becomes indispensable; like a caring father, it cannot avoid the obligation to punish an unruly child. In other words, a false church cannot do without violence, without imposing doctrinal solutions, established rituals and hierarchies, and, most importantly, without relying on secular authority, with a 'sword' forcing submission and subordination. The true Church, on the other hand, is only created by the power of the Spirit, who calls 'saints' to participate: those converted, determined to walk voluntarily (without pressure from others) on the path of truth and justice, a narrow path of fidelity to the Gospel teaching.

Underhill implies:

The fundamental idea of the Baptists was antagonistic with all this. They thought and said that the temple could not be built until God had provided the stones. Holy men must be first produced by the power of the Spirit of God, and then shall a building rise to the glory of Him who had redeemed them by his blood. No human workman could be of use but as the channel of blessing; it was the prerogative of God to create anew in Christ Jesus. His word was the only effectual instrument of divine energy: force and coercion of every kind were inadmissible. *Faith is the gift of God*; and no other weapon must the ministers of God's Word employ.

Since then the church ought to be the aggregated result of an internal divine operation, exerted on every individual before he becomes a member of it, so in its formation no kind of outward compulsion can be permitted. The unconscious babe cannot be made a member of a community, where a hearty willing assent of the regenerated mind is an essentials condition of membership, since intelligence is not there to give value and significance to the deed; nor may men be driven by force or fear, as foolish sheep, within the fortified barrier of the nation's church, since these cannot convert the soul [Underhill 1846: lxxvi–lxxvii].

The early Baptists did not dispute that the magistrate's 'sword' was commanded by God (Romans 13,1–7); however, this 'sword' does not rest on His Church, the community of saints in Christ. The 'sword' of the magistrate rightly punishes for violations of state law, even with death, but in the Church, the ultimate punishment is excommunication (Matthew 18,15–18), not execution. State law regulates human relations, the affairs of the transient world, but does not interfere with relations among members of the never-ending Church because it is someone else who establishes and executes the law here. Intolerance and violence against infidels (religious dissidents) results from a confusion of earthly and spiritual order.

To sum up, the impotence of state authority in matters of the Church system, teaching, or discipline remains, in the opinion of the fathers of the Baptist movement, closely linked to credo-baptism. Their position was in sharp opposition to the paedobaptist defence of infant baptism, promoted in the *Heidelberg Catechism* (answer to question 74), popular among the Puritan reformers of the Church of England, and gradually gaining support also within itself. The Baptist Church, made up exclusively of 'saints,' is surrounded by unbelievers. Both 'saints' and unbelievers, collectively subject to the public authority, are obliged to obey its orders and prohibitions, which condition a peaceful coexistence of both groups within the same commonwealth. The Church will not conform to this body through human expectations, desires, or decisions, even if having the power of a 'sword'. The Church is in the world, but is not the world; it functions in areas occupied by individual states, but their borders do not define the scope of the Church. Thus, a state church, with universal (inclusive, virtually obligatory) membership, which the Church of England was intended to be – and its internal struggle became the setting for the emergence of the Baptist movement – is implicitly a work of man, who sins with a lack of humility towards the Creator's plan. As a result, state church is not and cannot be an authentic Church.

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