

11 How the Reformation affected politics and rights

The Reformation started a movement for religious freedom that emancipated the population from obeying their ruler's dictates as to what religion they should follow and the regulation of the church as to how they should practice it so that we now have the freedom to choose our beliefs, change them and practice them. The Bible in English facilitated personal religion. An early campaigner for religious tolerance was the Baptist Thomas Helwys who petitioned James I on behalf of people of all religions. Gradually, freedom of religion was extended to all beliefs and practices. The Reformation was not only concerned with the freedom of religion but was also a human rights movement, because most human rights have their roots in the Bible and in human consciences.



When Henry VIII came to the throne in 1509 there was no freedom of religious belief or practice. Henry VIII by Hans Holbein, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. Commons.wikimedia.org



The title page of the first authorised Bible in English – the Great Bible of Henry VIII. The Bible in English enabled people to read and apply God's Word for themselves without the religious leaders acting as intermediaries. Commons.wikimedia.org

The situation prior to the Reformation

In western Europe there was one church, the rulers of most of the countries were absolute rulers. The Pope not only controlled the church but exercised considerable political power over those rulers. The Bible was not available to the general population in their own language and so they had to rely on what the clergy told them. People were told what religion to follow and how to practice it.

The effect of the availability of the Bible in English

When the Lord Jesus Christ came to earth he communicated directly, both to crowds and individuals, instead of going through the religious and political powers of the day. In the same way, as shown on panels 4, 5 and 6, when the Bible was widely available in English, people could read and apply God's word for themselves without the religious leaders acting as intermediaries. However, this direct communication from God to man could only be of limited effect while rulers dictated which religion citizens were to follow, how it was to be practiced and successive rulers could change what was required, as shown on panels 2 and 3.

Queen Elizabeth I's decree of 15 June 1570 said that she would not have any 'consciences unnecessarily sifted to know what affection they had to the old religion' i.e. Roman Catholicism, but she did not grant the freedom to manifest that religion because it might result in disorder. As religion and politics, both national and international,

were so interconnected, religious disputes often led to behaviour that could be regarded as treasonable and so the twin aspects of the freedom of religion – freedom of belief and freedom of religious practice – remained separate.

In the early 17th century Thomas Helwys, one of the first Baptists, pursued the question of religious tolerance for people of all religions with James I and died in prison as a result. The authorities clamped down on

religious practice so progress in extending religious freedom was slow. It started with encouraging private devotions outside of the church – Thomas Cramer described the Book of Common Prayer as a 'text book of liberty', but it was not until 1689 that the Toleration Act extended some rights to Protestant Dissenters and 1829 and 1833 that the Jewish and Catholic Emancipation Acts were passed.

The Reformation was not only concerned with the freedom of religion but was also a human rights movement, because most human rights have their roots in the Bible and in the consciences of humankind. New dissenting churches espoused what the Bible taught about equality between all classes and quality of people and that the poor and dispossessed should be provided for. This movement accelerated following the revival of the 18th century.

The Reformation and Human Rights



The Cyrus Cylinder – an early inscription of law. British Museum. Commons.wikimedia.org

Human rights, which in previous ages have been known by other names such as natural laws, are not a modern concept although their formal legalisation is. Various rights have been recognised from the earliest times in the Ten Commandments, writings of Chinese philosophers, Indian rulers and famously the decree of Cyrus the Great, founder of the Persian Empire, which dates from the 6th century BC.

What is clear is that there is a common thread of right and wrong throughout humanity. When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was being drafted a panel of philosophers was appointed to seek the views of a wide range of religions and cultures and they reported that people who seem far apart in theory can agree that certain things are so terrible in practice that no one will publically approve them and that certain things are so good in practice that no one will publically oppose them. As Paul wrote in Romans 2 vv.14–15, 'when Gentiles who do not have the law [the Bible], do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness and their thoughts now accusing them, now even defending them.'

The English common law has developed and applied many of the human rights that we treasure today, such as the right to life and freedom from torture, some of which date from the 15th century. The Freedom of Religion was one of the last human rights to be recognised.