

Religious Freedom: some historical perspectives and present applications¹

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Introductory remarks

Freedom is a precious commodity. It is at the heart of the Christian message and is the basis for a Christian way of life. Jesus stressed that freedom is a vital aspect of discipleship. *He is the Truth.*² And we are told that as we follow him, *‘the Truth [i.e. Jesus Christ] will set us free.’*³ But what is this true freedom that people can experience through their relationship with Christ? It clearly has an important spiritual component, but must also have practical implications. How does the freedom that Christ gives translate in how we live our faith and in how we relate to others who practice their faith differently from how we do?

Our modern understanding of religious freedom is embedded in our conviction that all human beings share some basic, inalienable rights. These have been codified in the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). *It was agreed by most nations on earth, that all men, women and children have these universal rights, regardless of where they live, and irrespective of their gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and political or religious persuasion. Since then, several other pieces of international legislation have been added, dealing more specifically with certain individual rights.*

These human rights documents cover a wide spectrum. There are security rights that stress the sanctity of the human body and protect people against such crimes as murder, massacre, genocide, torture and rape. Political rights guarantee the liberty to freely participate in political activities, the right to express oneself freely and the right to take part in protests. Other rights ensure that each person is entitled to due legal process and cannot be imprisoned without trial or be subjected to abuses of the legal system. In addition, the welfare rights (or

¹ Major parts of this lecture are adapted from a presentation I gave at the European Theology Teachers Convention, held at Friedensau Adventist University, on April 21, 2017. This presentation was entitled: ‘Religious Freedom in the Lutheran Tradition and for the Adventist Christian in 2017.’

² John 14:6.

³ John 8:31.

economic rights) stipulate that every person must have access to education and must be protected against severe poverty or starvation. The rights that guarantee equal citizenship for all, emphasizing total equality before the law and forbidding every form of discrimination, have come increasingly to the forefront in recent years, especially in Western countries which have experienced an influx of large numbers of immigrants.⁴

In the context of our present discussion article 18 of the *Universal Declaration* is of prime importance:

*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.*⁵

When dealing with freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, a few aspects stand out.

1. The inner freedom that the Christian can experience when he lives ‘in Christ’.
2. The freedom to believe and worship as one chooses.
3. The issue of separation between church and state.
4. The absence of coercive measures by the church.
5. The absence of coercive measures by the state.

Great progress has been made in ensuring a greater degree of freedom of religion and conscience in most parts of the world. A major step forward was made during the Second Vatican Council when the Roman Catholic Church formally accepted the right to religious freedom of all people.⁶ But much remains to be done.

In our present discussion of various aspects of religious freedom we must first of all recognize that our contemporary concept of religious liberty is of relatively recent origin. In ancient times, in particular, areas of the world were mostly ruled by a system of theocratic absolutism, in which the rulers were often venerated as divine figures. And we must also

⁴ Reinder Bruinsma, ‘Sorgen um die Religionsfreiheit in einer postmodernen Welt,’ *Gewissen und Freiheit*, no. 62 (2008), pp. 18-35.

⁵ The various human rights instruments can be found in many sources. For an easily accessible web-version, see http://lib.law.washington.edu/_archive/humanright.html.

⁶ The text of the ‘Declaration on Religious Liberty’, is found in: Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 799-812.

accept the tragic fact that ever since Christianity came on the scene ‘religion and freedom have not been natural allies.’⁷ In most of Christian history we see a serious lack of religious freedom. Although through the ages the church regularly insisted that it should be free from all control of temporary rulers, the reality was usually rather different. Freedom of the church from the control by the state may be an important part of our modern view of religious freedom, but it was long in the making. Scholars disagree whether political philosophers or theologians were the primary movers in the process of establishing a theoretical framework to undergird freedom of conscience and religion.⁸ Fact is, that some religious thinkers did underline the primacy of the individual conscience and this certainly had a major impact on the theories of religious rights that gradually developed.

Often the church’s demand of freedom from coercion by the state was not accompanied by a generosity to grant full freedom to individuals to follow their own conscience and to make their own religious choices. For many centuries the church was frequently inclined to organize the suppression and even the persecution of its own dissident members.⁹ In theory the church usually upheld the notion that non-Christians could not be forced to convert to Christianity, but in actual practice this principle was often ignored. The official policy of the medieval church was that Jews should be free to exercise their own religion, but in this respect the practice was often also quite different.

Although a lot has been achieved in defending and safeguarding religious freedom around the world, several organizations—such as the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom—still regularly report the numerous infringements and point to dozens of countries where religious freedom remains an illusion.¹⁰ And even in our ‘free’ Western world there is good reason to remain alert, as individuals and organizations may still ride roughshod over the religious rights of individuals or unpopular groups.

Among these introductory remarks, we must also mention that religious freedom is more than *indifference* as to what people believe and goes beyond mere *tolerance*. This is an important

⁷ James Wood, ‘Editorial: Religion and Religious Liberty,’ *Journal of Church and State*, 33 (1991), p. 226. Quoted in: Noel B. Reynolds and W. Cole Durham, eds. *Religious Liberty in Western Thought* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996), p. 29.

⁸ Reynolds and Durham, op. cit., pp. 38-42.

⁹ Reynolds and Durham, op. cit., p. 36.

¹⁰ See, e.g. <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Overview%20USICRF%202016%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

point to remember in our twenty-first century world, in which the attitude of many people towards other religions is at best one of tolerance, rather than of genuine respect for their religious freedom. In many areas in the world the relationship between Christians and Muslims is at best one of often state-enforced) toleration. But, as Dr. Bert B. Beach, a well known Adventist champion of religious freedom, once stated: ‘Tolerance implies that freedom of religion and belief is not really an intrinsic right, but that society in a spirit of beneficence may grant a privilege to that what is not wholly approved of, or possibly even suspect.’¹¹

The Reformation and religious freedom

In this year in which the world commemorates Luther’s first public step on the path of the Reformation, it is more than fitting to ask the question: *How does our modern view of religious freedom compare with the understanding of the magisterial sixteenth century Reformers?* Let us first briefly look at Luther’s thinking about religious freedom.

In 1520 Martin Luther wrote his foundational treatise about man’s freedom—*On the Freedom of a Christian*.¹² Although it is clear that Luther felt strongly about the need for freedom from the papal yoke and from the non-biblical teachings of the Roman Catholic Church—which is especially clear in his dedicatory letter to Pope Leo X, that introduces his pamphlet—*On the Freedom of a Christian* is mainly about the *inner* freedom of the Christian. He states two propositions as his point of departure: ‘A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.’ Two paragraphs further on he clarifies this as follows: ‘We first approach the subject of the inner man, that we may see by what means a man becomes justified, free, and a true Christian; that is, a spiritual new, and inward man.’

For Martin Luther the freedom of the Christian is fundamentally *freedom from the law*. The person who is really free, ‘has no need of works, neither has he need of the law, and, if he has no need of the law, he is certainly free from the law . . . no one should need the law or works for justification and salvation.’ That does not mean that the Christian has a license to do ‘bad’

¹¹ B. B. Beach, *Bright Candle of Courage* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1989), p. 13.

¹² The Latin title is: *De Libertate Christiana*; in German: *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*. Several English translations may be found on the Internet. I am quoting from: <http://www.jmstanton.com/Docs/Martin%20Luther%20-%20On%20the%20Freedom%20of%20a%20Christian%20with%20lines.pdf>

things, but ‘his works are to be done freely, with the sole object of pleasing God.’ A modern Lutheran author commented: ‘Here is an early Lutheran document . . . filled, nay, rather bursting at the seams with the universal, law-free gospel of God’s mercy and therefore of justification by grace through faith on account of Christ alone.’¹³

With regard to the relationship between church and state Luther built on Augustine’s doctrine of the two kingdoms—both of which God created, albeit with different roles. Both church and state have their own spheres, but Luther did not want total separation. The state should provide protection for the believers, while Luther also allowed civil rulers a degree of control over ecclesiastical matters. [Luther himself was provided protection after the Diet of Worms by Elector Frederick, and remained for some time under an assumed name (Squire George) in the Wartburg Castle.] There is considerable justice in these words: ‘Defenders of the free-church principle have, with some fairness, concluded that eventually this doctrine of the two realms created a persecuting Lutheran state church.’¹⁴

Lutheranism spread widely in parts of Europe, but not uniformly so. And whether or not one became a Lutheran Christian was in many cases not the individual’s free decision. Much depended on whether or not the ruler in a particular area had converted to Lutheranism. The Peace of Augsburg in 1531 was concluded between the Emperor Charles V and the Schmalkaldic League (an alliance of German Lutheran princes). Rulers could choose whether their region would be Roman Catholic or Lutheran. This settlement is summarized in the formula: *Cuius Regio, Eius Religio*. Calvinism was not legally recognized until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.¹⁵

In Germany Lutheranism had achieved a position of equality alongside Catholicism. But in the Scandinavian countries Lutheranism would fully replace Catholicism as the established church. Until recently almost the entire populations of the Scandinavian countries belonged to

¹³ Timothy J. Wengert, ‘Luther’s Freedom of a Christian for Today’s Church,’ *Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. XXVIII (2014), p. 9.

¹⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA; Blackwell Publishing, 1998), p. 202.

¹⁵ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, vol. 2: Reformation to the Present* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1975 edition), pp. 726-729.

the Lutheran State Church.¹⁶ In recent decades the Lutheran church in the Nordic countries lost this privileged status.

In Calvin's thinking church and state were also closely connected. The state, Calvin argued, must be subjected to the church and Christian statesmen are to defend true doctrine.¹⁷ However, only in a few countries did Calvinism become the 'established' religion, Scotland being the most prominent example.

A free will?

Both Luther and Calvin were opposed to the concept of a free will. When Desiderius Erasmus published his booklet entitled *On the Freedom of the Will*, Martin Luther responded with *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525).¹⁸ Luther denied that man has a free will and can freely choose either good or evil, since sin incapacitates human beings from taking any step towards salvation. It is often not sufficiently recognized that not only Calvin, but also Luther believed in double predestination, even though Luther did not emphasize it quite as much as Calvin did.¹⁹ Calvin refuted the idea of a free will at length in the second book of his monumental *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.²⁰ [Adventists feel much more akin to the views about the human free will of the Radical Reformation²¹ and of, what would later be called, the Arminian tradition.]

The rather intolerant attitude of the Reformers towards the 'mother church' that they had left is well known; but we must also note the harsh disciplinary measures against those in their own ranks who held theological positions they deemed heretical. Calvin's approval for the execution of Michael Servetus in 1553 because of his, in Calvin's view, erroneous teachings on the doctrine of the Trinity and on the doctrine of baptism, is a sad example,²² and his refusal to extend freedom of religion to those who preached or practiced 'heresies' is likewise well-known. Luther's relationship with the more radical reformer (and his former friend) Andreas Carlstadt, who was to be banished from Saxony by Frederick the Wise, is a clear

¹⁶ Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston, MA: The Beacon Press, 1952), pp.141-159.

¹⁷ Bruinsma, *ibid*, pp. 133-138.

¹⁸ <http://www.chapellibrary.org/files/4913/7643/2893/botw.pdf>

¹⁹ Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), p. 148.

²⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, transl. by Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), pp. 145-216.

²¹ George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), *passim*.

²² See, e.g. T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2006 ed.), pp. 146-154.

illustration of Luther's intolerance with regard to alternative theological views.²³ Luther's unrelenting anti-Semitism is also well documented.²⁴ Thus Luther manifested a regrettable inconsistency in his approach to freedom. We would have expected something else from the man who in 1521 stated before the Diet of Worms: 'To act against our conscience is neither safe for us or open to us. On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me.'²⁵

Mixed feelings about the Reformers

Seventh-day Adventists are very positive with regard to many aspects of the work of the sixteenth century Reformers. But Martin Luther, by and large, received a much more positive press in the Adventist Church than John Calvin, even though Calvinism was a much stronger force in American nineteenth-century religion than Lutheranism. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this is found in the way the two Reformers are treated in Ellen G. White's book *The Great Controversy*.²⁶ Not only did she devote far more pages to Luther than to Calvin, but she also appears to be much more positive about Luther than about the Reformer from Geneva.

With regard to Calvin, Ellen White states: 'For nearly thirty years Calvin labored at Geneva, first to establish there a church adhering to the morality of the Bible, and then for the advancement of the Reformation throughout Europe. His course as a public leader was not faultless, nor were his doctrines free from error.'²⁷ A little further in the same book she spoke in no uncertain terms about the 'monstrous' Calvinist doctrine of predestination.²⁸ Compare this with the glowing accolade to Martin Luther: 'Foremost among those called to lead the church from the darkness of popery into the light of a purer faith stood Martin Luther. Knowing no fear but the fear of God, and acknowledging no foundation for faith but the Holy Scriptures, Luther was the man for his time.'²⁹ And when referring to Luther's appearance before the Diet of Worms, Ellen White comments: 'Thus stood this righteous man upon the sure foundation of the word of God. The light of heaven illuminated his countenance. His greatness and purity of character, his peace and joy of heart, were manifest to all as he

²³ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York/Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950), p. 263.

²⁴ See Martin Luther, *Von den Jüden und iren Lügen* (1545). A recent English version is: *On the Jews and their Lies* (Austin, TX: River Crest Publishing, 2014).

²⁵ V. Norskov Olsen, *Papal Supremacy and American Democracy* (Loma Linda, CA: Loma Linda University Press, 1987), p. 130.

²⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2005).

²⁷ Ellen White, op. cit., p. 236.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 261.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 120.

testified against the power of error and witnessed to the superiority of the faith that overcomes the world.’³⁰

But Adventists are critical with respect to a number of the positions of the Reformers. They do, for instance, not support the views of the Reformers with regard to various aspects of freedom. They agree with Luther that we are ‘free from the law’ in the sense that our salvation is *sola gratia*, but they would be hesitant to talk about freedom from the law in the way Luther does. Adventists stress the limitations of the law, but also underline that the law, in Paul’s words, is ‘holy, righteous and good’, and still plays an important role in the Christian life.³¹

Another area where Adventists find it difficult to appreciate these magisterial Reformers is in the area of their understanding of man’s free will, as we already noted earlier.

Likewise, when we use our modern concept of freedom of conscience and religion as the standard for measuring the approach of the Reformers, we must conclude that they fall far short of our ideals. Some have maintained that Luther replaced Catholic religious persecution with Protestant oppression and persecution. We already referred to the classic example of Calvin’s intolerance—the case of Servetus—but his harsh enforcement of very strict discipline in Geneva is also a far cry from what we would call religious freedom.

The Radical Reformation and its abiding influence

Adventists disagree with both Luther and Calvin (as well as Zwingli) with respect to the relationship between church and state. On this issue Adventists are also much closer to the Radical Reformation tradition, which would be the dominant philosophy of the so-called ‘free’ Protestant churches, and became the basis of the American principle of full separation between church and state.³²

Some groups in Reformation times were more ‘radical’ than the ‘magisterial’ Reformers, and their associates. The Anabaptists were the most important branch of the so-called ‘Radical

³⁰ Ibid., p. 160.

³¹ E.g. John C. Brunt, *Romans* (series: *The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1996), pp. 143-162.

³² Reinder Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of the Church* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2009), p. 106.

Reformation.’³³ They rejected the kind of close association between church and state that would lead to the establishment of ‘state churches’ or ‘established churches’ in a number of European countries. They were opposed to the territorial system of the Lutherans and were also opposed any participation in warfare and the swearing of oaths.

The Radical Reformation provided the immediate roots for movements as the Mennonites, the Quakers and the Baptists. In many ways modern evangelicalism--and, indirectly also Seventh-day Adventism--can trace some of its major ideas to the Radical Reformation. The Anabaptists insisted that believers’ baptism was the only valid mode of entrance into the church, which they conceived of as a visible community of committed Christians. They were staunch defenders of the individual’s free will as the basis for accepting or rejecting the salvation that Christ offers. They interpreted the communion service in purely symbolic terms, and in some cases reintroduced foot washing as a rite that precedes the communion. Several views of this Radical Reformation also became part and parcel of Adventist beliefs and practices, to a large extent through the early Methodist connections.³⁴

Adventist interest in freedom of religion

Seventh-day Adventism originated and developed in a nineteenth century North-American context. It is important to remember that from its inception American Protestantism had a distinctly Calvinist flavor. Most settlers in the American Mid-Atlantic region and in New England were Calvinists, including the English Puritans, the French Huguenots, the Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam (New York), and the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians of the Appalachian back country. The majority of the newcomers had Calvinist roots, while the Lutherans accounted for only five percent of the population.³⁵ Most successful among the so-called ‘free churches’ were the Baptists and the Methodists, whereas the percentage of Roman Catholics would also steadily increase as the nineteenth century progressed.³⁶

³³ A good guide to the ‘Radical Reformation’ is still: George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962). See also: William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996 3rd ed.).

³⁴ See the historical introduction by Dennis Fortin to a special 125th anniversary edition of Ellen White’ book *Steps to Christ* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2017), pp. 22-58. See also the special section ‘Adventism’s Methodist Roots’ in: *Spectrum* (September 1996), pp. 26-54.

³⁵ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 25.

³⁶ Reinder Bruinsma, *Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes toward Roman Catholicism, 1844-1965* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1994), pp. 15-19.

One significant factor is, undoubtedly, that America was greatly affected by two powerful waves of revivals, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century respectively. This had a significant effect on Calvinist thinking in America, in particular with regard to the fundamental doctrine of predestination. This teaching proved to be a very ‘contentious’ doctrine.³⁷ Arminian influences that had come from Europe had already convinced many that this basic Calvinist tenet was not correct, but the revivalist preaching, that emphasized ‘free will’, in an often very popular manner, also had a profound influence.³⁸ The fact that the very idea of predestination did not fit well with the American idea of choosing and working hard to reach one’s own destiny, should also be mentioned.

Many immigrants (‘pilgrims’) to North America had suffered religious persecution in Europe. But this did not mean that in their new country they would always favor full religious freedom and total separation of church and state. There were, however, some significant developments in colonial America as the initial supremacy of ‘established’ churches came increasingly under fire.³⁹ Roger Williams, a Puritan-turned Baptist leader ‘was perhaps the foremost spokesman for religious freedom in seventeenth-century America.’⁴⁰ We might also mention the relative freedom granted to Roman Catholics in the state of Maryland,⁴¹ as well as the struggle for religious freedom by the Quakers in the state of Massachusetts.⁴²

The American Revolution brought political freedom from Great Britain, but also resulted in many changes in the area of church and religion. The churches faced the challenge to ‘adjust to the ideology of democratic republicanism that had driven the war.’⁴³ The new republic, of course, needed a constitution. This Constitution was signed on September 17, 1787. The First amendment of the US Constitution took effect in 1791. It stipulated that ‘Congress shall make

³⁷ As expressed in the title of an important book on the history of the idea of predestination in North America: Peter J. Thuesen, *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁸ In the last two paragraphs I relied mostly on my (as yet unpublished) lecture in the spring of 2016 at Friedensau University: ‘The Sixteenth Century Reformation and Adventist Ecclesiology.’ See also my book *Geloven in Amerika: Kerken, Geschiedenis en Geloof van Christenen in de Verenigde Staten* (Uitgeverij Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1998), pp. 86-88.

³⁹ Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York / Oxford: Oxford University Press, 194 ed.), pp. 3-23.

⁴⁰ Edwin S. Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), back cover.

⁴¹ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 331-334

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 176-181.

⁴³ Mark A. Knoll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), p. 144.

no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the exercise thereof.’ The question may well be raised, however, ‘how the First Amendment came to coexist with what, from a modern vantage point, looks like a thorough intermingling of church and state.’⁴⁴ Church historian Knoll reminds us, however, that ‘the colonial background of the new states was so overwhelmingly Protestant that it was simply assumed that such things as Sunday legislation, laws prohibiting atheism and promoting public morals . . . were appropriate.’⁴⁵

Adventism--a new, Sabbath-keeping, religious movement, that originated in this nineteenth century Sunday-keeping context--could expect to meet with considerable opposition. This explains why almost from the beginning Adventism would be strongly interested in the promotion of full religious freedom and of a total separation between church and state. The early Adventists saw some large dangers looming. In 1864 a group of ‘zealous opponents of the growing secularization in the United States’ established the National Reform Association. Their aim was to convince Congress that the state should enforce the general principles of Christianity. To begin with, God should be put into the Constitution. They failed in their plans, but then, from 1874 onwards, shifted gears, emphasizing legalized Sunday observance.

In some states Sunday laws were enacted, resulting in the persecution of the violators of these laws. In the 1880’s some hundred Adventists were either given jail sentences, or condemned to enforced labor, or fined. Things came further to a head when in 1888 Senator Henry Blair of New Hampshire— unsuccessfully, notwithstanding a gigantic petition drive—tried to make Congress adopt a national Sunday law.⁴⁶ It was in this climate that Ellen G. White wrote *The Great Controversy*⁴⁷ and developed an end-time scenario that, in many ways, was a reaction to the lack of freedom many Seventh-day Adventists were very concretely experiencing in the opposition from other Christians. At the same time in the entire Protestant world in the USA anti-Catholicism was fed by the millions of immigrants from Catholic countries, who

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 145.

⁴⁶ Richard W. Schwartz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2000 rev. ed.), pp. 241-245. For a detailed historical survey of the attempts to enforce Sunday legislation in the United States, see Warren L. Johns, *Dateline Sunday, USA: The Story of Three and a Half Centuries of Sunday-law Battles in America* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1967).

⁴⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association). The original edition of 1888 was revised in 1911. See Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds., ‘The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan’, in: *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013), pp. 847-850

constituted an economic as well as religious threat. In addition, the United States itself was also seen as a future persecuting power.

Early on—in 1889—the Adventists decided to establish the Religious Liberty Association. It stated as its key principle that civil governments do not have the right to legislate on religious matters, and it underlined the importance of complete freedom of conscience.⁴⁸ Ever since, the promotion of religious liberty, through its department⁴⁹ and through independent organizations, has been an important concern for the Adventist Church. The International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) was established in 1946, at the initiative of the Adventist Church. It is headquartered in the Adventist head office in Silver Spring, but enjoys the participation of many non-Adventists experts.⁵⁰ The religious liberty efforts of Adventists have focused on protecting the religious rights of Adventist believers, but not exclusively so, as it recognizes that all people must enjoy full religious freedom.

Issues and questions

Looking at where we are today with regard to religious freedom, Adventists are entitled to some sense of pride and satisfaction. Their ideas of what religious freedom means have matured and their efforts—both by public events and by silent diplomacy—to promote it have often paid off, and Adventist contributions in this domain has been recognized by many.

Adventists have traditionally been very hesitant—to put it euphemistically—to get involved in interfaith or interdenominational projects, but they have been more than willing to cooperate with other faith communities with regard to humanitarian and developmental projects, and in the promotion of religious freedom.

As we discuss this topic of religious freedom during this conference, a few important issues come to mind:

⁴⁸ Don F. Neufeld, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, vol. II (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996), pp. 430-434.

⁴⁹ The church department that is devoted to religious liberty as one of its main concerns is since 1962 named Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty (PARL). See *SDA Encyclopedia*, vol. II, pp. 391-397. See also Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Involvement of a Major Apocalyptic Movement* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001), pp. 108-110.

⁵⁰ *SDA Encyclopedia*, vol. I, p. 787.

1. Unfortunately, among Adventists, the conviction that liberty of conscience and of religion should be recognized as an essential right of every person is not always matched by a genuine *interest* in what others actually believe. Often Adventists continue to cherish stereotypical views of what other faith communities stand for, or to hold on to facts that are no longer accurate.⁵¹ The traditional Adventist understanding of the Roman Catholic Church and of the Protestant churches as apostate communities, has all too frequently led to disrespectful statements and unbecoming conduct towards those who believe differently from what we believe in. It would, in my view, show a mature Christian attitude if we would not just grant others the right to worship and believe as their conscience dictates, but also show respect and a greater willingness to understand what they stand for, and to give praise where praise is due.

2. With regard to another major issue that arises, when we look at the ‘freedom of a Christian’ in its most fundamental sense, we turn once again to what Martin Luther wrote in his 1520 booklet on the *Freedom of a Christian*. Where Luther’s views on ‘freedom of the law’ tended to undervalue the role of God’s law in the life of the Christian, Seventh-day Adventists have often erred in the other direction and have not sufficiently understood and experienced the true Christian freedom that is based on an adequate understanding of justification by faith. In spite of the debate in Minneapolis in 1888 and its aftermath (and other developments since), the problem of legalism⁵² has remained an ever-present danger. ‘Christ our Righteousness’ must remain the basis for a correct understanding of the doctrine of salvation and of the concept of justification by faith.

This is in my view even a more essential point today than in much of our Adventist past, considering the increasing popularity of the so-called ‘Last Generation Theology,’ with its dangerous emphasis on perfectionism—and its often undue stress on the human role in the salvation process. This alternative theology, which was fiercely presented by M.L. Andreasen,⁵³ has in recent years been vigorously promoted by a number of (mainly independent) ministries and also clearly present in the writings and sermons of some of our world leaders. Here, Luther should remind us of the true freedom that comes when we reject

⁵¹ See Reinder Bruinsma, *Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes toward Roman Catholicism, 1844-1965* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1994), pp. 299-300.

⁵² For a succinct but in-depth discussion of legalism, see Edward W.H. Vick, *Let Me Assure You* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1968), pp. 117-120. For a broader treatment, see George R. Knight, *The Pharisee’s Guide to Perfect Holiness* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1992).

⁵³ In particular in the chapter ‘The Last Generation’ in his book *The Sanctuary Service*, first published by the Review and Herald Publishing Association in 1947 (pp. 299-321).

any tint of legalism, and live freely on the basis of justification by faith. In my view the ‘Last Generation Theology’ leads many adherents to doubt or deny that our salvation is only and completely based on the merits of Christ.

3. Freedom of conscience and the freedom to express one’s beliefs can be a complicated issue. How much freedom can a denomination tolerate with regard to diversity in religious and doctrinal views, on the part of its leaders and ministers and its members?⁵⁴ To put it concretely in the context of recent developments in Adventism: *Do Adventist church members have to agree with every detail of all the 28 Fundamental Beliefs*, in order to qualify as ‘true’ Adventists? If not, at what point may/should the church organization introduce sanctions (church discipline), or refuse to further recognize a person’s membership?

It seems to me that there is no doubt that one cannot be a Christian unless one accepts the basic tenets of the Christian faith. Likewise, it becomes meaningless to claim being an Adventist Christian, when denying the basics of the Adventist teachings. There must be certain parameters, within which one must stay. There may not be enough dialogue in many places in the church about what these ‘basics’ consist of. Yet, there seems to be a reasonably broad consensus that, for instance, the Sabbath doctrine is more ‘basic’ than the distinction between ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ food, or that Christ’s second coming is a more vital belief than the identity of the ‘beast from the earth’.⁵⁵

In actual practice there has always been, and still is, both a considerable degree of consensus and a considerable amount of theological diversity in the Adventist Church. Most Adventist church members consider some degree of diversity to be acceptable. In fact, it might (justifiably, I think) be argued that a fair degree of diversity is not only inevitable but even desirable in an organization that is alive. But the question is: *How much* of such diversity can be tolerated without losing the necessary degree of unity?⁵⁶ Many would suggest that requiring absolute uniformity in our assent to all doctrines is unnecessary and undesirable. Moreover, it goes against the genius of Adventism, which in its formative years—and also

⁵⁴ An enlightening article is: Lydia Veliko, ‘Criteria for Unity and the Limits of Diversity: Towards an Ecclesiology of United Churches,’ *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 62, number 1 (March 2010), pp. 30-40.

⁵⁵ Revelation 13: 1-18.

⁵⁶ See e.g. my article in *Ministry*, December 2010: ‘Theological Diversity: a Threat, an Asset, or what?’ Also my contribution to the Festschrift for Dr. Jon Dybdahl, *Encountering God in Life and Mission* (ed. Rudi Maier): ‘Are all truths Truth? Some Thoughts on the Classification of Beliefs’, pp. 173-188.

beyond those—showed a considerable degree of diversity, also in doctrinal matters. I for one, lament the recent attempts at codifying in ever more detail what a ‘real’ Adventist must believe. This is, in my view, a form of coercion that limits the freedom a follower of Jesus must be able to experience.

Related to this point is the gradual growth of the church’s corpus of policies. A few decades ago the General Conference Working Policy Book was a 250-300 page book. Over time it has grown into a tome with a multiple number of pages. In itself the creation of extra policies and making further refinements is not limiting the freedom of the church workers and the church members. In fact, some policies may protect that freedom. A problem arises when policies receive a status that is almost on a par with church doctrine and when one ecclesial body claims to provide the only correct interpretations of those policies--as is the case with regard to some policies that directly or indirectly impact on the debate on the ordination of female pastors.

It would seem (to me and many others) that church entities below the General Conference level ought to have considerable freedom to adapt policies to their regional or local circumstances. In San Antonio that freedom was denied to those world regions that wanted to have the possibility of ordaining women pastors. The very reason why the church towards the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century decentralized church authority, by creating a series of other church bodies (unions and later divisions) with considerable authority, was to make regional and local adaptations of ecclesial practices possible. There is a feeling on the part of many that this freedom to adapt rules and regulations has in recent years been limited.

Academic freedom

Another question that has become quite urgent is the matter of *academic freedom*. How much space can be given to those who teach theology in the Adventist colleges and universities? Few will deny that there must be some parameters as to what is acceptable and what is not, however difficult it may be to reach a consensus in this matter. The educational institutions that are operated by the denomination must retain their Adventist identity (whatever that exactly is must continue to be a topic for dialogue!). But it would seem that there are tendencies in the church to go overboard in controlling everything that happens in the theological departments of our institutions of higher learning, by establishing a process for the

systematic screening of all theology teachers with regard to their orthodoxy. This hotly debated screening process for all university and college level theology professors, entails that they should not only agree with all the 28 Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists, but must also, among other things, subscribe to the document entitled ‘Methods of Bible Study’, that was voted by the Annual Council of the church in Rio de Janeiro in 1986.⁵⁷ Many question whether this does not go too far and whether this does not, in fact, limit the possibilities for research and may inhibit creative theological thinking. Some also feel that this is a factor in creating a climate of fear, in which freely expressing one’s ideas, and having an open dialogue with colleagues, becomes rather risky, as it may easily create the suspicion of a lack of orthodoxy and even cause the loss of one’s job. They wonder whether this development does not eventually lead to precisely the kind of system of ecclesial control that the Reformers protested against. Does ‘religious freedom’ not demand a significant degree of academic freedom, even when this might entail some risks? No doubt, this discussion will continue.

It is fair, I think, to ask the question: Should a denomination that has been and is so much in the forefront with regard to the promotion of freedom of conscience and religion not be willing to extend a fair amount of that freedom to its own members and its theology professors?⁵⁸ After all, is it not true what President Ronald Reagan once said during a speech at Moscow University: ‘Freedom is the right to question and change established ways of doing things.’⁵⁹ And would that not also include established ways of thinking and of formulating things in the domain of theology of adapting church policy o varying situations?

Conclusion

This year we commemorate that five centuries ago Martin Luther took a courageous step towards freedom: freedom from an organization that had no place for those who disagreed with its codified beliefs, and from a system that did not allow the people the freedom to study the Bible and think for themselves. That the Reformers themselves often did not grant this same freedom to their followers and to those who disagreed with them, ought to be a warning

⁵⁷ The document is found on the official website of the Adventist World Church:

<https://www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/documents/article/go/-/methods-of-bible-study/>

⁵⁸ See also my most recent book: *Facing Doubt: A Book for Adventist Believers ‘on the Margins’* (London, UK: Flankó Press, 2016), pp. 151-172.

⁵⁹ http://www.notablequotes.com/f/freedom_quotes.html#EO7SMl0qRmgotYBo.99.

for us, that we should be careful in any restrictions of the freedom of thought for our fellow-believers.

Our ‘pioneers’ insisted that we should have no creed but the Bible, after they had found freedom from the codified creeds and confessions of faith in the denominations from which they had come. Should we then not be extremely careful with any measures that restrict our freedom to explore truth for ourselves and to formulate our findings perhaps in new and more profound ways? What I say must not be construed as an appeal for playing loose with the basic Adventist tenets of faith, but must rather be seen as a call to protect—I say it again: within certain parameters--the freedom of conscience and of belief that our tradition has so much emphasized in the past.

In many ways Luther’s views—and those of Calvin and other magisterial Reformers—remained defective. Five centuries after that momentous morning in Wittenberg, when Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the castle church, we may rejoice in the fact that today human rights are in most countries high on the agenda and that religious freedom is defended and practiced by many. It is gratifying to see that the Adventist Church has made freedom of conscience and of religion a point of major emphasis. But the time may have come for the Adventist Church to critically look at itself and determine whether or not this freedom of religion and conscience is perhaps being jeopardized by an over-emphasis on uniformity with the unintended result that that true underlying unity is at serious risk.