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Thomas Helwys, the forgotten pioneer of religious freedom for everyone

By Thomas Paul Schirmacher. Reprinted from Christian Daily International, Jul 29, 2026

(Bonn, 04.08.2026) On July 4, the United States of America celebrated the 250th anniversary of its independence. One of the freedoms most closely associated with the American experiment is freedom of religion. Yet the idea itself is older than the United States and it took time to implement in all of the states of the USA.

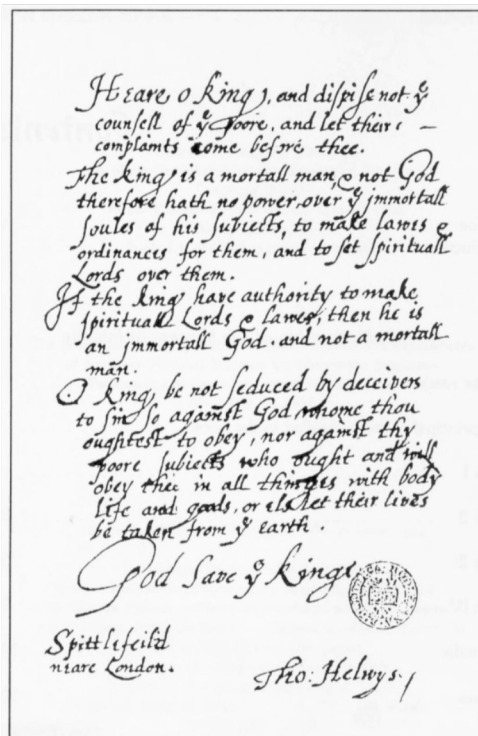
The anniversary, however, provided a fitting opportunity to remember two earlier milestones.

The English Baptist Thomas Helwys was the first ever to propose religious freedom for all people. He was — depending on the sources — born around 450 years ago and died approximately 410 years ago in prison for his major text on religious freedom (“A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity”).

Twenty years later, Roger Williams, potentially influenced by Helwys, founded Providence, Rhode Island (390 years ago)—the first community that assured in its constitution full religious freedom as we know it today.

The contemporary international concept of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is frequently presented as a product of Enlightenment philosophy or post-1945 international law. The anniversaries commemorated in 2026 remind us that one of its deepest roots lies elsewhere: in early seventeenth-century Christian theology.

Although many Christians before Helwys had argued against religious persecution or pleaded for greater toleration, Thomas Helwys took a decisive step further. He did not



Helwys's letter to King James I in 1612, which cost him his life © Public Domain

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merely argue that some religious minorities should be protected. He presented an open ended list and argued that civil government has no God-given authority over religion itself.

The life of a pioneer

Thomas Helwys was born around 1575 into a prosperous family in Nottinghamshire, England, and trained as a lawyer at Gray's Inn in London. As a member of the English Separatist movement, he became convinced that the Church of England had departed from the pattern of the New Testament.

When persecution intensified under King James I, Helwys and his congregation fled to Amsterdam in 1608. There, together with John Smyth, he rejected infant baptism and embraced believers' baptism.

From this small community emerged the movement from which the General Baptists would later develop. Unlike many religious refugees who remained safely in the Netherlands, Helwys made the remarkable decision to return to England. He knew that imprisonment was the likely consequence. Yet he believed that England itself needed to hear the message that faith cannot be commanded by the Crown.

The book that cost him his life

Soon after his return, Helwys published "A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity" (1612), one of the most courageous books of the Reformation era. He even sent a copy directly to King James I.

In it he wrote one of the most famous sentences in the history of religious freedom: "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."

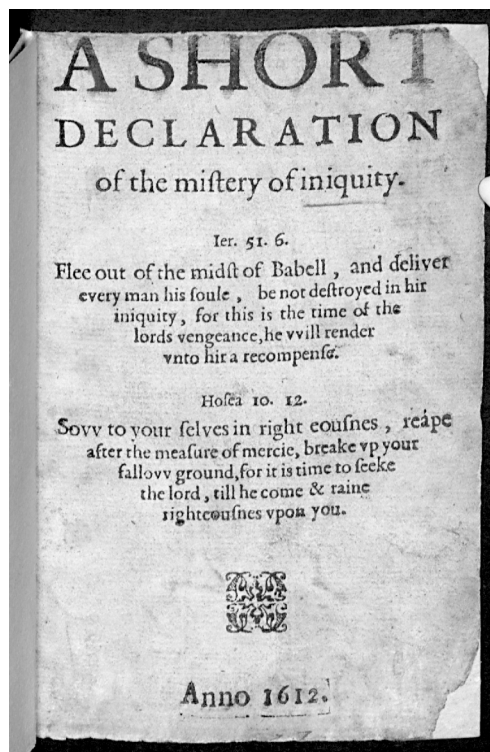
For Helwys, this was not primarily a political argument but a theological one. Every human being must answer to God personally. Since the king cannot answer to God on behalf of another person's conscience, the king has no authority to rule over that conscience.

Helwys therefore limited the authority of the state rather than expanding the rights of government. The state simply had no divine commission to control religion. Helwys wrote

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Title Page 'A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity'
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the sentence for which he is best remembered: "Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure."

Readers usually notice the words "heretics," "Turks" (the contemporary English term for Muslims), and "Jews." For the early seventeenth century, that list was already astonishingly broad. Yet the most important words may be the last two: "...or whatsoever."

Those two words change the whole meaning of the sentence. Helwys was no longer compiling a longer list of religious groups that deserved protection. Instead, he deliberately refused to close the list.

His point was not that Christians should tolerate Jews and Muslims in addition to other Christians. His point was that the civil magistrate has no authority to decide which religions deserve freedom and which do not.

In other words, Helwys did not merely lengthen the list of those entitled to religious liberty; by adding the words "or whatsoever," he abolished the need for such lists altogether.

Religious freedom no longer depended on who a person was or what that person believed. It depended on the simple fact that government had no jurisdiction over the relationship between God and the human conscience. This is what makes Helwys such an extraordinary figure. His principle was open-ended. It applied not only to the groups he named but to everyone.

King James I did not welcome Helwys' challenge to royal authority. Shortly after publishing his book, Helwys was arrested and imprisoned in Newgate Prison in London. He probably died there around 1616 as a result of the harsh conditions.

In a sense, Thomas Helwys became a martyr for freedom of religion. Not because he sought liberty only for his own religious community, but because he insisted that the same freedom belonged even to those whose beliefs he himself regarded as mistaken.

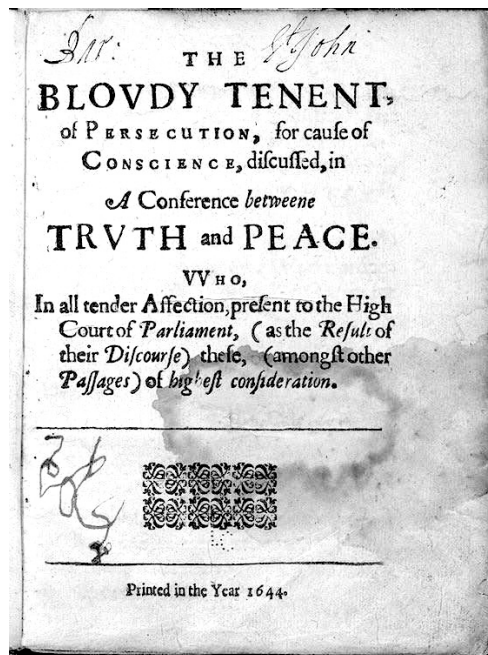
Roger Williams: putting the principle into practice

A generation later, Roger Williams carried remarkably similar convictions across the Atlantic. After being banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Williams founded Providence in 1636. There he established a community in which civil government deliberately refrained from controlling religious belief.

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Front cover of Roger Williams' 'The Bloody Tenet of Persecution' (1644) © Public Domain

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Whether Williams knew Helwys' writings cannot be established with certainty. Historians continue to debate the question. What is beyond doubt is that Williams demonstrated in practice what Helwys had defended in principle: a society could remain orderly and peaceful without giving the state authority over religion.

Providence itself remained exceptional for many years. Religious liberty spread only gradually throughout what later became the United States. The American tradition therefore did not begin in 1776; its roots reach further back to earlier theological and constitutional insights.

A legacy worth remembering

Thomas Helwys was the earliest known Christian writer to formulate an explicit, open-ended understanding of freedom of religion or belief. His concern was not simply to protect particular minorities but to deny the civil magistrate any authority to decide who should enjoy religious freedom.

Roger Williams later showed that this principle could become the foundation of a functioning political community. Together they remind us that one of the freedoms most cherished today did not begin as an Enlightenment theory or a constitutional innovation. It first emerged from deeply biblical reflections on the sovereignty of God, the dignity of conscience, and the limits of earthly government.

As the United States continues on from its 250th anniversary, it is worth remembering these deeper roots. The road to American religious liberty did not begin in Philadelphia with William Penn (Quakers) or the drafting of the constitution, but originated with the theological conviction of an English prisoner who dared to tell his king that the Crown had no authority over the human conscience; and with an exiled colonial dissident who proved that such freedom could indeed sustain a commonwealth.

Downloads and Links

- Photo 1: Helwys's letter to King James I in 1612, which cost him his life © Public Domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Helwys_to_King_James_I.jpg
- Photo 2: Title Page 'A Short Declaration of the Mistery of Iniquity' © Public Domain: <https://theangus.rpc.ox.ac.uk/treasures/short-declaration/>
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- The original article at Christian Daily International: <https://christiandaily.com/news/thomas-helwys-the-forgotten-pioneer-of-religious-freedom-for-everyone>

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