

Baptist Union of Southern Africa

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TO: THE CHAIRMAN	
FOR ATTENTION OF: WORKING GROUP NO. 2 ON CONSTITUTIONAL PROPOSALS	
FROM: TREVOR M SWART GENERAL SECRETARY	

We respectfully submit the following contributions for your discussions on Constitutional Proposals

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

The Baptist Union of Southern Africa submits to C.O.D.E.S.A. that it is vitally important for the future of the country that religious liberty be entrenched in the country's constitution and bill of rights.

For nearly five hundred years Baptists have advocated this principle. The first full statement in the English language advocating religious liberty is to be found in the Baptist Thomas Helwys's book *The Mystery Of Iniquity* which he submitted to King James II of England in 1615 and for which he was imprisoned and died:

"Our lord, the King, is but an earthly king, and he hath no authority as a King but in earthly causes, and if the King's subjects be obedient and true subjects, obeying all humane laws made by the King, our lord the King can require no more; for men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure."

We submit that similarly today, the state has no authority over a person's religious belief.

We also submit that no religious body has authority to punish those who, for conscience sake, decide to change the religion in which they have been brought up.

We further submit that no community or family has authority to punish those who, for conscience sake, decide to change their religion.

As Helwys stated, "men's religion is between God and themselves" and no state or community has power to take that liberty from them.

We further submit that every person or group has a right to propagate what he or the group believes, even if that belief is wrong. Consequently, a person or group has a right to tell others where, in his or its opinion, another person or group is in error. Truth matters more than anything else, as Jesus stated before Pontius Pilate.

We believe that parents and communities should have freedom to teach their children what they believe, but that they should not in any way infringe the full religious liberty of the individual to follow his own conscience.

We are particularly disturbed by the attitude of the Muslim community throughout the world. There is abundant evidence of their persecution of those who abandon their family's or community's faith for what they have come to believe is the truth. We see this as a disgrace and a danger to the quest for reality and truth.

There are other groups and individuals as well that use methods that deny religious liberty. One of the worst examples has been that of atheistic communism. Atheism is, of course, a religious faith. Millions of our Baptist folk lost their lives under Stalin in Russia.

We, therefore, think that it is important that in the future constitution there should be no possibility of the infringement of the right to religious liberty.

The Baptist Union of Southern Africa resolved at its Annual Assembly in 1987 that:

"We Baptists believe in the principle of RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, namely that no individual should be coerced either by the State or by any secular, ecclesiastical or religious group in matters of faith. The right of the private conscience is to be respected."

CONCLUSION

While, firmly believing that Christianity is the Truth and that Jesus Christ is the one Saviour and Hope of the world, we urge C.O.D.E.S.A. to make sure that full religious liberty is entrenched in the constitution and bill of rights, so that no man is forced to act contrary to what he believes and all men and women feel free to propagate their convictions.

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