

REVERING THE TRADITION OF AMERICA'S "TWO SPIRITS"

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In France, Alexis de Tocqueville saw that the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of freedom* were often at odds with one another. But Americans had harmonized them. He wrote in the first volume of *Democracy in America*, “[Anglo-American civilization] is the product . . . of two perfectly distinct elements that elsewhere are often at odds. But in America, these two have been successfully blended, in a way, and marvelously combined. I mean the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of liberty*.”¹ Tocqueville saw that through the symbiotic interaction between public spirit and religion in citizens’ exercise of rights and fulfilling of duties, freedom was maintained. We have wisdom to gain from Tocqueville’s observations of how public spirit mediated between religion and freedom in the early nineteenth century. Conservatives in particular should resist the urge to look back on 1831 America with overweening nostalgia, but we also should resist the tendency to expel religion to the outermost corners of society, thus rendering it null and void. And religious people today should heed Tocqueville’s warnings about mixing religion with political agendas, rendering it as nothing more than another political faction. While much has changed since the nineteenth century, much of what Tocqueville offered us in his masterful *Democracy in America* serves to give admonition and encouragement about the prospects for maintaining freedom in a democratic age.

The aspirational conservative disposition seeks to preserve and extend the best of the American tradition because that tradition is an inheritance passed down to us from our ancestors who strove and sacrificed to secure it for us. The tradition of religious freedom is part and parcel of the American

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¹Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), I.i.2.69.

tradition. America is not perfect and Americans have not applied religious freedom flawlessly and consistently according to the ideals of the founding documents. Similarly, conservatives are not always faithful to their own traditions, nor do they perfectly balance public and private interests, or social obligations with their attending privileges. There are no “true” conservatives in this sense, just as there are no “true” Americans. We are all on the path, striving for the attainment of ideals but recognizing that we have miles to go before we arrive at the ideal.

Tocqueville’s observation that the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of freedom* were in harmony in the United States in 1831 is consistent with an American tradition going back to the colonial founding and continuing to the present day. As tradition, we can understand the harmony between freedom and religion as being intentionally and consciously established in practice, enshrined in the Constitution, articulated, clarified, defended, and extended over time, and handed down from one generation to another since the seventeenth century. Americans have revered the tradition of this harmony for centuries—albeit imperfectly—such that hardly anyone questioned it. For example, in 1993, the Congress passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act—unanimously in the House and 97-3 in the Senate. In 1998, sixty-two percent of Americans believed that religion was very important to the national character, and seventy percent of Americans thought that patriotism was necessary for citizens. But in 2023, only thirty-eight percent of Americans valued patriotism, and thirty-nine percent valued religion.² By 2024, the so-called religious nones—atheists, agnostics, and those who claim no religious faith—comprised the largest single “religious” group in America. Twenty-eight percent of Americans check the none box on religious identity surveys. The nones outnumber Protestants (24%) and Catholics (23%). By contrast, in 2007, only sixteen percent identified as having no religion.³

These are alarming statistics for anyone who cares about the Great Commission or the success and flourishing of the American republic. Part of revering tradition means acknowledging that there are no questions in the present that have not been asked and answered in the past. Tocqueville is a figure from the past that Baptists overlook, but he is an incredible

²Aaron Zitner, “America Pulls Back From Values that Once Defined It, WSJ-NORC Poll Finds,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/americans-pull-back-from-values-that-once-defined-u-s-wsj-norc-poll-finds-df8534cd>.

³Jason Derose, “Religious ‘Nones’ Are Now the Single Largest Group in the US,” *National Public Radio*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1226371734>.

resource in helping us understand the necessity of religion to freedom.

When Tocqueville came to the United States, he saw that religion in America was different than in his native Europe. Furthermore, he found that Christianity was eminently suited to American culture. Consistently since the thirteen colonial foundings, people emigrated to America to get away from religious supremacy in Europe, bringing with them a desire to practice their faith freely. Tocqueville said, “They brought to the New World a Christianity that I cannot portray better than by calling it democratic and republican.”⁴ Thus, “from the onset, politics and religion found themselves in accord, and they have not ceased to be so since.”⁵ A primary reason was that in America, contrasted with the situation in Europe, Christianity is advanced through persuasion of the mind and the heart rather than legal or physical coercion. Moreover, Christianity affirms the equality of every man, woman, and child. All persons are given the duty to obey God’s commands, and all persons are affected by the Fall. Tocqueville put it this way: “Only the religion of Jesus Christ has placed the sole grandeur of man in the accomplishment of duties, where each person can attain it; and has been pleased to consecrate poverty and hardship, as something nearly divine.”⁶ Since all people face poverty in some measure—some have more financial resources, but all are bound by time—and hardship is universal, Christianity is a religion of equality.

The significance of Christianity to the security of liberty in America could not be overstated, in Tocqueville’s mind. He wrote, “The people see in religion the safeguard and the divine origin of liberty.”⁷ Eighteenth-century Europeans assumed that religious fervor would wane, and as it did so, secular philosophy would grow in influence and liberty would thus expand. Tocqueville disagrees: “It is unfortunate that facts do not agree with this theory.”⁸ Religion and liberty were “intimately joined” and “reigned together over the same soil” in America.⁹ Even though there were many different denominations when Tocqueville came to America, the diversity of Christian practices and dogmas did not detract from the unity of Christian ethical understanding. “Each sect worships God in its way, but all sects preach the same morality in the name of God,” Tocqueville

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.ii.9.467

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.ii.9.467.

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.ii.9.469.

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.ii.9.467; note w.

⁸Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.ii.9.467.

⁹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.ii.9.479.

observed.¹⁰ Because of this unity in diversity, Tocqueville did not believe that there was any place in the world where Christianity did not dominate a culture so thoroughly. Thus, nowhere else in the world could see political, economic, and religious liberty in such fullness.

One of the key arguments Tocqueville advanced in *Democracy in America*, and this is worth the price of the book, is that religion is necessary to preserve liberty in the face of the despotic tendencies of democratic societies. A society's taste for equality of conditions would overcome its desire for liberty without watchful vigilance and patience. Americans, Tocqueville wrote, "want equality in liberty, and if they cannot obtain that, they still want equality in slavery. They will suffer poverty, enslavement, barbarism, but they will not suffer aristocracy."¹¹ Equality yields immediate material gain because in America there is no limit to bar financial success except one's own creativity and work ethic. Unlike in France, where one is either born to wealth or not, in America, rags-to-riches stories were all too common. Excessive wealth results in social isolation, and social isolation results in citizens being more and more willing to let the government handle the problems faced by towns, states, and the nation as a whole. But religion orients people's perspectives to eternity, to those things that transcend the self and selfish interests that are encouraged in democratic societies, where the people are sovereign. Religion also serves as an impetus to bring citizens together to work for common causes. Associating together voluntarily in common cause was foundational to the strength of liberty in America because, while individuals are always easy prey for a tyrannical state, citizens who pool their resources have strength in numbers. It is far less easy to tyrannize a well-funded, numerically strong, and motivated group of people who are willing to sacrifice for their cause, even if they are in the minority. The great irony of American democracy is that while church and state were separate, Tocqueville called religion "the first of their political institutions."¹²

One additional feature bringing religion and liberty in harmony, according to Tocqueville, was American mores. Tocqueville called mores "habits of the heart" and "the whole moral and intellectual state of a people."¹³ We might refer to the mores as the moral and intellectual culture of a people,

¹⁰Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.ii.9.473.

¹¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II.ii.2.878.

¹²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.ii.9.475.

¹³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.ii.9.466.

those things that a people consider values that characterize their society. Historically, hard work, honesty, cooperation, devotion to God, family, and flag have all been definitive American mores. Tocqueville saw that the laws in the United States set the patterns for American practices, but he insisted that the mores were more powerful than the laws in informing American democracy as a whole.

By informing the mores of the people, Tocqueville argued that religion uniquely instills habits that lead to the preservation of freedom. When Tocqueville came to America in 1831, religion was the most powerful intellectual influence on the American people. It shaped American customs, from which American laws emerged. He considered one of his most important observations in his 300,000-word book that the mores of the people do more to secure freedom in democratic America than any other single category. “If in the course of this work, I have not succeeded in making the reader feel the importance that I attributed to the practical experience of the Americans, to their habits, to their opinions, in a word, to their mores, in maintaining their laws, I have missed the principal goal that I set for myself by writing it,” wrote Tocqueville.¹⁴ Through marriage and family life, religion informs the mores that undergird the political, social, and commercial life of the republic. Marriage and family life are indispensable to success in commerce and politics because infidelity leads to failure in both of those realms. At the heart of fidelity in the home is the virtue of courage. Courage drives one to take risks in order to make money, but it also serves to motivate a person to sacrifice on behalf of others.

Tocqueville credited the New England Puritans as the ones who instilled Christian morality into American culture. These were the spiritual fathers of America. While he acknowledged Virginia as the first of the English colonies, it was the New England Puritans that instilled their moral conception of liberty—to do all that is right and just without fear of force or restraint—into American culture. “The civilization of New England has been like those fires kindled on the hilltops that, after spreading warmth around them, light the farthest bounds of the horizon with their brightness.”¹⁵ The New England townships were the model of local democracy because the towns succeeded in balancing the interests of the private citizen with those of the citizens of the town. Citizens saw themselves as having a personal stake in the success of the town, such that if the town

¹⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.ii.9.499–500.

¹⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.i.2.53.

was flourishing, then the individual citizens were also flourishing; but if the town's fortunes were sinking, no citizen could escape sinking fortunes themselves. This public spirit that existed in the towns of New England was informed by the Christian understanding of ordered love—that every person should look not only to their own interests, but to the interests of others also. Striking a balance between public and private interests is exceedingly difficult to achieve, but American democracy, informed as it was by religion on the level of the mores, set the conditions for such an achievement. Tocqueville wrote,

Religion sees in civil liberty a noble exercise of the faculties of man; ... religion knows that its dominion is that much better established because it rules only by its own strength and dominates hearts without other support. Liberty sees in religion the companion of its struggles and triumphs, the cradle of its early years, the divine source of its rights. Liberty considers religion as the safeguard of mores, mores as the guarantee of laws and the pledge of its own duration.¹⁶

Tocqueville offers us a unique perspective in time on the tradition of harmony between religion and freedom. Through Tocqueville's writings, we see as through a window a moment in American history in which Americans cultivated and lived by a rule that was handed down to them by their ancestors, a rule would also be stewarded for future generations. Still, we recognize that Americans are just persons with a human nature. That human nature exists in a profound tension. On the one hand, human nature is dignified by the fact that persons are created in the image of God (Psalm 8). On the other hand, human nature is fallen as a result of the Fall (Isa 59:1-2; Rom 3:23). A mark of the mature and fully formed conscience in a person is that one is able to hold two opposing forces in an idea without tearing that idea asunder. Conservatives strive to hold the tension between dignity and fallenness in human nature without exalting one and ignoring the other. Christians know that this tension in human nature has been resolved in the Incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. So, while the tension between dignity and fallenness in human nature is there for us to grapple with in the past and present, we recognize that such an effort is not in vain.

¹⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.i.2.70.

Americans in the past were not innocent of moral failings and frightfulness, and they have not always been true to the ideal of maintaining a harmony between freedom and religion, at least not for everyone. But transgressions against the ideal do not disprove the legitimacy of that ideal—they confirm it. Furthermore, we know that not every tradition is worth conserving or revering. Some traditions are no longer practical in the same ways they were in the past (like the husbanding of horses), and some traditions are immoral (like chattel slavery and legal racial segregation). Still, Americans have historically been a people to revere tradition as a category, even though they have generally received individual traditions critically. The tradition of maintaining and extending the harmony between Tocqueville's two American spirits—the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of liberty*—is a tradition worthy of receiving from our ancestors who are now dead, of stewarding for our own enjoyment, and of preparing them for generations yet to be born.

Considering the tension between two opposing realities, take the example of the American founders. There were fifty-five delegates to the Philadelphia Convention that drafted the Constitution in the summer of 1787. Twenty-five of those delegates were slaveowners. Thomas Jefferson, who was in France during that summer, penned the immortal words of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Jefferson owned hundreds of slaves over the course of his lifetime at his Virginia plantations of Monticello and Poplar Forest. It is fashionable today to call the founders "hypocrites" because many of them owned slaves all the while endorsing Jefferson's ideals in the Declaration. Such people who are unable to hold two historical realities in tension with one another also seem not to have the capacity to grasp the concept of aspiration. To aspire to an ideal, one first understands that he has not arrived at the ideal but has a path to follow. He is willing to take that path and stay on that path no matter how difficult the way may be because the upward path he is on is the path of improvement, and thus it offers its own reward.

Abraham Lincoln gave a speech in Chicago during his 1858 Senate campaign against Stephen Douglas, in which he modeled how to hold in tension the reality that the founders maintained the institution of slavery while setting the nation on the aspirational path of abolishing it. Lincoln

argued that the founders kept the institution of slavery in the United States at the national founding, not because they thought it was morally good, but because it was necessary that they do so in order to achieve the federal union of the states. The Constitution that created the federal union made the states greater than the sum of their parts, better than they would have ever been if they had pursued their own national careers as independent states or if they had formed a number of smaller unions. "We had slavery among us, we could not get our constitution unless we permitted them to remain in slavery, we could not secure the good we did secure if we grasped for more, and having by necessity submitted to that much, it does not destroy the principle that is the charter of our liberties," Lincoln said.¹⁷ In other words, the necessity of keeping slavery for the sake of creating the federal union does not render the Constitution false to its dedication to freedom.

Lincoln explained his meaning by appealing to Scripture, when Jesus taught His disciples that "you are to be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48).¹⁸ As Jesus doubtless knew that the disciples would always be unable to attain to divine perfection in this life, he also knew that to lay the aspiration before them was central to fulfilling their calling as his disciples. Lincoln said, "So I say in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can. ... Let us then turn this government back into the channel in which the framers of the Constitution originally placed it."¹⁹ Christ's moral teachings were aspirational, in the same way that the founding documents like the Declaration and the Constitution were aspirational. Lincoln denied that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document but asserted that it was developed on the basis of the principle of liberty for all. If the Constitution were a pro-slavery document, then the Constitution would have to affirm that slavery was a positive moral good. But this was not so. "Necessity," Lincoln said, "was the only argument they ever admitted in favor of slavery. ... They found the institution existing among us, which they could not help; and they cast blame upon the British King for having permitted its introduction."²⁰

¹⁷Abraham Lincoln, "Speech at Chicago, Illinois, July 10, 1858," in *Abraham Lincoln: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 2009), 147.

¹⁸Translations of Scripture are from the NASB.

¹⁹Lincoln, "Speech at Chicago," 147.

²⁰Abraham Lincoln, "Speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act at Peoria, Illinois, October 16, 1854," in *Abraham Lincoln: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Library

Lincoln said that the founders were ashamed of slavery, like one is ashamed of a cancerous growth, in that they never used the term “slavery” in the Constitution, but “person held to service or labor.” True, the founders left the cancer alone in 1787, like the victim of the cancer “dares not cut out at once, lest he bleed to death.” Nevertheless, the victim trusts to a future day when “the cutting may begin at the end of a given time.”²¹ The first Congresses under the Constitution acted toward slavery in ways that demonstrated, in Lincoln’s words, “hostility to PRINCIPLE, and toleration ONLY BY NECESSITY.”²² Central to Lincoln’s arguments against pro-slavery Democrats was that the founders intended Jefferson’s equality clause to be meant for everyone and the Constitution to set the nation on the path toward the extinction of slavery.

This is a small example of how America is an aspirational nation. America was founded on principles of human dignity, individual freedom, free exercise of religion, and equality under the law. Have Americans been perfect in living up to these moral standards? Of course not. Americans have been conscious of their flaws and have given much to follow the path of improvement. America was not founded to preserve slavery. It was founded on a principle that made slavery untenable, as well as any form of legal or economic oppression. That is one of the reasons why millions of people from all over the world have sacrificed all they possessed to get here since America became a nation.

Similarly, American conservatives of the Burkean tradition are aspirational because they have taken on the aspirational quality of their country. Being a conservative commits a person to the flourishing of individuals, communities, and the nation guided by tradition, just law, and an ethic of love informed by the Bible. Conservatives are often vilified by the left as being inhuman, but that is utter nonsense. Faithful conservatives aspire to the good, true, and beautiful and do so, guided by concrete experience, not by utopian visions.

The tradition of harmony between religion and liberty has prevailed in America since the national founding. Have there been past exceptions? Undoubtedly. Has religious freedom been unstained in America? Certainly not. But as Lincoln said of the founders’ attitudes toward slavery, the principle of harmony between religion and liberty has been the standard

of America, 2009), 96.

²¹Lincoln, “Speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act,” 97.

²²Lincoln, “Speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act,” 97. Emphasis in the original.

since the beginning of our national life. Aspirational conservatives are among the only ones in America today who have the will to conserve that harmony. Among self-described Democrats, the political party of the progressive left, only twenty-three percent consider themselves to be patriots, while fifty-nine percent of Republicans, the party representing conservatives, do. Twenty-three percent of Democrats value religion, while fifty-three percent of Republicans say the same.²³ It is not exaggeration to say that conservatives have a greater will to conserve the traditions of patriotism and religious freedom than do progressives. It is also not an exaggeration to argue that conservatives are more interested in conserving religious freedom than those on the far right—who, it is important to note, disclaim and repudiate conservatism—who support magisterial Christian nationalism, along with the establishment of state churches.

If we are going to be conservatives, and if we are going to conserve the American tradition of harmonizing religion and liberty, then we must know what a conservative is and what conservatives value. In other words, we must know what conservatives are before we know what conservatives do. The aspirational conservative is pre-political. The one possessing a conservative disposition aims for a higher moral destiny for persons and societies, guided by the light of permanent things, tradition, and just order. He also understands human fallibility and the real world. He reckons with the human condition marked as it is by limitation, imperfection, and change. The moral profit and ordered freedom of the human person is the primary consideration of the conservative disposition. For those goods to obtain in the real world of scarcity, sin, and death, we must heed the proven experience of generations past which reveals to us how we understand concepts like rights, freedoms, and ethics. We turn our backs on the past and on tradition at our peril.

Conservatives value a well-ordered imagination because an imagination that realistically takes stock of the intersection between the eternal and the temporal prepares the person to accept the world as it is, but with hope. Conservatives order their love for their nation as an extension of their family and understand that the nation is neither innocent of great wrongdoing, nor is it the earthly manifestation of the infernal regions. Conservatives know that liberty apart from order is a lie. Liberty without moral order is slavery to vice, but too much order stifles liberty. Balance between liberty and order is difficult but attainable, as earlier generations

²³Zitner, "America Pulls Back," March 27, 2023.

have learned over time. Conservatives look to the past and read history to grow out of childishness and into maturity. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things” (1 Cor 13:11). Conservatives know that history puts us on the path to maturity. Finally, conservatives value religion because religion expands our view from our mundane concerns and our selfishness to our common fate that awaits us, as well as the world to which we go. If we do not fear God, how can we expect to find peace and contentment here on earth?

Those things that harmonize liberty and religion on earth are the things that conservatives cherish. We love and seek to cultivate public spirit because public spirit is a form of patriotism, or a well-ordered love of country. We want to continue voluntarily associating for civil and religious causes because in doing so we cooperate with our neighbors, make new friends and associates, and find strength in the numbers of like-minded citizens. We see self-interest through the lens of the interests of the whole, thereby obtaining goods for ourselves and for others at the same time. We support the separation of church and state, not because we want to empower the state against the church or redefine religious freedom as a lackluster “freedom of worship,” but for the sake of free religious exercise. And we want to create a culture that values religion and religious people because a nation that values faith also values morality, truth, and just order. Those traditional features of American life that foster the health of religion and augment the scope and quality of religion are not utopian aspirations. They are concrete because we have examples of their beneficial manifestations in the experiences of those who have preceded us. And as we have enjoyed the inheritance we have obtained from earlier generations, it is our duty to the younger generations to hand them down unsullied.

We live in uncertain times. No matter. Every generation has lived in such times. No person has ever been able to see their end from their beginning. Every person who has ever lived had struggles, failures, hopes, and triumphs. It is so with all of us. Unlike the dead, our story is not finished yet, and we have the hope that tomorrow is another day. We have a God who is in control of our circumstances. We have a faith built on the truthfulness of God’s character. And we have a truly great country that has historically recognized the pre-political right of all persons to worship, obey, and speak publicly for the God which they serve. Let us not be ashamed of the inheritance we enjoy from our forebears, nor let us

be ashamed to be known as true patriots. In patriotism there is courage, gratitude, vigilance, and charity. In patriotism, there is hope.

Every Christmas, the *Wall Street Journal* publishes an editorial first written and published in 1949 by Vermont Royster. Royster eloquently called to mind the world of Rome, the world in which Jesus was born and Paul was converted from a persecutor to a preacher of Jesus's gospel. That world, like ours, sought salvation in power—power to redistribute wealth and power to enforce religious, political, intellectual conformity. What Augustine called the City of Man has and will continue to exalt itself and oppose any and all that stand in its way. The human tendency to grasp for power and to worship self-appointed gods for the sake of selfish ambition remains dominant, even in the freest and most democratic of societies. Only those who are realistic about the paradox of human dignity and human fallibility, who venerate tradition without worshiping it, and who understand that liberty is only manifested through just order are in the position to hold the powers of tyranny at bay. In the face of darkness, malice, ignorance, selfishness, guile, and hypocrisy, let us find courage in Royster's closing words as we guard and steward our American heritage of religious liberty for the sake of our children and grandchildren: "And so Paul, the apostle of the Son of Man, spoke to his brethren, the Galatians, the words would have us remember afterward in each of the years of his Lord: Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."²⁴

²⁴Vermont Royster, "In Hoc Anno Domini," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 22, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-hoc-anno-domini-christmas-editorial-vermont-royster-115e41b8>.

“THE CORNERSTONE OF HUMAN RIGHTS”: Carl F. H. Henry and Religious Freedom in the Late Twentieth Century

Nathan A. Finn*

INTRODUCTION

Carl F. H. Henry (1913–2003) was one of the most consequential evangelical figures in the period between World War II and the end of the Cold War.¹ He was a professor, journalist, and missions advocate. He published scholarly books and articles for the academy, wrote accessible textbooks for seminary students, and penned countless popular essays for pastors and lay readers. Henry’s interests ranged from philosophy, to theology, to ethics, to missions, to cultural engagement. He was aligned with several key evangelical institutions during his lifetime, many of which focused on theological education or the promulgation of evangelical ideas. For example, Henry served as a founding faculty member and the first academic dean of Fuller Theological Seminary in 1947, helped establish the Evangelical Theological Society in 1949, was the first editor of *Christianity Today* in 1956, and founded the Institute for Advanced Christian Studies in 1967.

Timothy George suggests that Henry was the “brains” behind several post-war evangelical initiatives and, along with pastor-educator Harold John Ockenga, “Henry established a platform for Bible-believing Christians against obscurantist fundamentalism on the one hand and compromising liberalism on the other.”² A recent collection of Henry’s essays for

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¹The best biographical introduction to Henry is his autobiography. See Carl F. H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian* (Dallas: Word, 1986). Other key sources that address Henry’s life and influence include Robert E. Patterson, *Carl F. H. Henry, Makers of the Modern Mind* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983); *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* (Winter 2004), issue theme: “Carl F. H. Henry (1913–2003): A Tribute”; Matthew J. Hall and Owen Strachan, eds., *Essential Evangelicalism: The Enduring Influence of Carl F. H. Henry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

²Quoted in “The SBJT Forum: Testimonies to a Theologian,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*

Christianity Today dubbed him the “architect” of the post-war evangelical movement.³ While the evangelist Billy Graham was undoubtedly the best-known evangelical figure of the era, Henry shaped the theological vision of what scholars have variously called the “classic” or “essential” theological consensus among post-war evangelicals.⁴ Henry cared deeply about the evangelical movement, publishing books with titles such as *Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, *Evangelical Responsibility in Contemporary Theology*, *Evangelicals at the Brink of Crisis*, *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration*, *Evangelicals in Search of Identity*, and *Evangelical Affirmations*.⁵

Though Henry is identified primarily as an evangelical, he was also a Baptist for nearly all of his Christian life.⁶ He received his theological education at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary and began his teaching career at the school. When he moved to Washington D.C., Henry joined Capitol Hill Baptist Church, where he remained a member for the rest of his life.⁷ Historically, Capitol Hill had been dually aligned with both the Northern Baptist Convention (NBC) and the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). However, almost a decade before Henry joined the church it ceased cooperating with the NBC because of theological

8.4 (Winter 2004): 85.

³Mark Galli, “Foreword,” in *Architect of Evangelicalism: Essential Essays of Carl F. H. Henry*, The Best of *Christianity Today* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019).

⁴See Gregory Alan Thornbury, *Recovering Classic Evangelicalism: Applying the Wisdom and Vision of Carl F. H. Henry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), and Hall and Strachan, *Essential Evangelicalism*.

⁵Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Contemporary Evangelical Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1957); Carl F. H. Henry, *Evangelical Responsibility in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957); Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Evangelicals at the Brink of Crisis: Significance of the World Congress on Evangelism* (Waco, TX: Word, 1967); Carl F. H. Henry, *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1971); Carl F. H. Henry, *Evangelicals in Search of Identity* (Waco, TX: Word, 1976); Kenneth F. Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry, eds., *Evangelical Affirmations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie, 1990).

⁶From the time of the Inerrancy Controversy, Southern Baptists have debated their relationship to the evangelical movement. The key early works in this discussion include James Leo Garrett Jr., E. Glenn Hinson, and James E. Tull, *Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”?* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), and David S. Dockery, ed., *Southern Baptists & American Evangelicals: The Conversation Continues* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1993). The *Southwestern Journal of Theology* dedicated its spring 2023 issue to the theme “Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals.” In that issue, I make a positive case for evangelical Baptist identity titled “Convictionally Baptist and Confessionally Evangelical: A Call for Southern Baptist Theological Faithfulness,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 65.2 (Spring 2023): 95-107.

⁷The name of the church when Henry joined was Metropolitan Baptist Church, which remained the church’s name until 1963, when it became Capitol Hill Metropolitan Baptist Church. In 1995, the name was changed again to Capitol Hill Baptist Church. See Caleb Morell, *A Light on the Hill: The Surprising Story of How a Local Church in the Nation’s Capital Influenced Evangelicalism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, forthcoming 2025), 5. I appreciate Morell providing me with a pre-publication copy of his manuscript.

liberalism in that denomination.⁸ Personally, Henry was still more of a conservative Northern Baptist in his sensibilities and key relationships, though he would come to identify more closely with Southern Baptists once the SBC shifted rightward during the Inerrancy Controversy of the 1980s and 1990s.

Henry devoted much of his energy to building a trans-denominational evangelical movement that downplayed ecclesiological distinctives, so he wrote rarely about his Baptist beliefs.⁹ Consequently, even Baptist scholars with considerable sympathy for Henry's thought have accused him of having an underdeveloped ecclesiology.¹⁰ However, Henry did devote attention to at least one traditional Baptist distinctive: religious freedom for all. He is not typically cited by scholars who write about Baptist views on religious liberty; this topic was not a major theme in his work. He addressed the topic periodically in the 1950s and 1960s, often either making a Christian case for liberty of conscience or critiquing totalitarian threats to religious freedom abroad.¹¹ However, in the final two decades of his public life he discussed religious freedom more frequently, carving out a perspective that differed in some respects from then-mainstream Baptist interpretations of the principle.

From the post-war era onward, the most vocal Southern Baptist religious liberty activists advocated for a strict separation of church and state, emphasized government neutrality in religious matters, and tended to focus more on challenging religious establishments—whether real or

⁸All the churches in the District of Columbia Baptist Convention were dually aligned with the NBC and the SBC. Beginning in 1947, Metropolitan Baptist Church designated their giving so that all of their funds went to the SBC and none were forwarded to the NBC. See Morell, *A Light on the Hill*, 144-45.

⁹Henry's most significant statement about his Baptist beliefs was his article "Twenty Years a Baptist," *Foundations: A Baptist Journal of History and Theology* 1 (January 1958): 46-54. The article was reprinted in Tom J. Nettles and Russell D. Moore, eds., *Why I Am a Baptist* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 209-17.

¹⁰For example, see R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "Carl F. H. Henry" in Baptist Theologians, eds. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1990), 530, and Russell D. Moore, "God, Revelation, and Community: Ecclesiology and Baptist Identity in the Thought of Carl F. H. Henry," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 8.4 (Winter 2004): 39.

¹¹See Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 509-27; Carl F. H. Henry, "The Fragility of Freedom in the West," *Christianity Today* (October 15, 1956), available online at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/1956/10/fragility-of-freedom-in-west/>; Carl F. H. Henry, "Pressures on Spain for Protestant Rights," *Christianity Today* (April 10, 1964), available online at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/1964/04/pressures-on-spain-for-protestant-rights/>; Carl F. H. Henry, "The Ground of Freedom," *Christianity Today* (July 3, 1964), available online at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/1964/07/editorials-40/>.

perceived—rather than advocating for free exercise of religion.¹² This was the posture of leaders such as J. M. Dawson, Foy Valentine, and James Dunn, the latter two of whom became closely identified with the moderate movement during the Inerrancy Controversy of the 1980s and 1990s. For his part, during these same years Henry offered a more theologically and politically conservative perspective on religious liberty and its implications.

Jason Duesing and Jesse Payne argue that Henry's political theology was shaped by his understanding of three theological themes: theology proper, biblical anthropology, and the kingdom of God.¹³ These themes are certainly present in Henry's articulation of religious freedom. He argued that religious liberty was first and foremost a theological concept, even if secular advocates of the principle did not acknowledge this reality. It was the most important of all human rights, and therefore must be defended against atheistic and religious critics who were willing to coerce the conscience in ultimate matters. Evangelicals and other socially conservative Christians should defend religious liberty for all, for the sake of preserving voluntary religion and the freedom to proclaim the gospel in a pluralistic world. The remainder of this article will expound Henry's mature view of religious freedom, articulated in the 1980s and 1990s, and suggest ways his views have been echoed among other conservative Southern Baptists from the 1990s to the present.

THE CORNERSTONE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Two of Henry's best-known works were written in the 1980s. In 1983 he completed his magnum opus, the six-volume *God, Revelation, and Authority*, and in 1986 he published his autobiography *Confessions of a Theologian*.¹⁴ But this was also a season when Henry was lecturing widely and publishing scholarly and semi-scholarly articles for a variety of outlets. Many of these shorter pieces addressed how Christians should respond to the growing secularization and re-paganization of American society.

¹²For a helpful treatment of the differences between the moderate and conservative perspectives on religious liberty, see Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 139-64. See also William Tillman, "Religious Liberty," in *Has Our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Thought since 1845*, ed. Paul A. Basden (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 306-28.

¹³Jason G. Duesing and Jesse M. Payne, "Carl F. H. Henry," in *Baptist Political Theology*, ed. Thomas S. Kidd, Paul D. Miller, and Andrew T. Walker (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2023), 382-92.

¹⁴Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols (Waco, TX Word, 1976-1983; reprint, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999); Carl F. H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian: An Autobiography* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986).

In the decade between 1984 and 1994, Henry published four collections of his shorter writings: *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society* (1984), *Christian Countermoves in a Decadent Culture* (1986), *Twilight of a Great Civilization* (1988), *Gods of This Age or the God of the Ages?* (1994).¹⁵ In 1996, Henry published his final short book, which also originated as a lecture, titled *Has Democracy Had Its Day?*¹⁶ While all these works were about the role of evangelical faith in an increasingly hostile culture, religious liberty was a consistent throughline that Henry returned to regularly.

The most comprehensive statement of Henry's views on religious liberty was a 1984 essay titled "Religious Freedom: Cornerstone of Human Rights," which was published in *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*. The essay originated as a lecture at a 1983 conference on Religious Freedom East and West: The Human Rights Issue for the Eighties, which was co-sponsored by the Institute on Religion and Democracy and the National Association of Evangelicals.¹⁷ Henry began by acknowledging that for the first time in both the history of nations and church history there was universal affirmation of religious liberty, at least in theory. He argued that the consensus developed gradually from the Reformation, through the Free Church traditions, to the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, to the 1948 United Nations (U. N.) Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent U. N. statements. However, despite the verbal affirmation of religious liberty among the nations of the world, Henry was concerned that the experience on the ground did not always align with the principle expressed. He argued that totalitarian states repressed religion and theistic states redefined religious freedom. There was no consensus among nations, whether theological or sociological.¹⁸ Henry's response to this problematic reality was to make a four-fold case for religious freedom through the remainder of the essay.

Henry's first argument was that biblical theism provides the only adequate basis for human rights, including religious liberty. While secular

¹⁵Carl F. H. Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society: Promoting Evangelical Renewal & National Righteousness* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1984); Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Countermoves in a Decadent Culture* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1986); Carl F. H. Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization: The Drift Toward Neo-Paganism* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988); Carl F. H. Henry, *Gods of This Age or the God of the Ages?* ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

¹⁶Most citations in this article will be taken from Carl F. H. Henry, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?* 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Leland House, 2019).

¹⁷Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 63.

¹⁸Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 63-64.

humanists affirmed religious liberty in principle, Henry believed they lacked the metaphysical basis for this commitment. Henry conceded that Christianity had an inconsistent track record on religious freedom historically. Under the Christendom model that prevailed in the West for 1,300 years, Christians championed confessional states and repressed religious minorities. Even in modern times, too many evangelicals have only championed religious liberty when it benefited their own interests. Yet, Henry believed that the Judeo-Christian tradition, which is rooted in biblical revelation, offers an intellectual foundation for religious liberty for all people, especially in the affirmation that God created all things and that all humans have inherent dignity as bearers of his divine image. In fact, for Henry, the Declaration of Independence and the U. S. Constitution offered a better basis for religious liberty and other human rights than the U. N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights precisely because the former documents acknowledged that human rights are gifted by the Creator rather than nebulous secular principles that are assumed to simply be intuitive to all people.¹⁹

Henry next argued that religious liberty is a universal right. He acknowledged that the 1948 U. N. Declaration made this point clearly, but he also noted subsequent U. N. statements were more ambiguous in their language and therefore at least potentially weaker in their commitment to religious freedom for all people. Terms like religion and belief were not clearly defined, thereby making their interpretation debatable. Henry's own interpretation was complex. On the one hand, he believed religious freedom should not be withheld from anyone simply because their beliefs are objectionable to the majority. No one should be coerced in matters of religion. On the other hand, he also argued religious freedom could not simply be a blanket endorsement of any belief or action that someone claimed to be religious in nature. Freedom from God and his design is no freedom worth having. What societies need is a rightly ordered understanding of religious freedom, which both acknowledges universal freedom of conscience and concedes that consciences are not inherently sacred and thus must be formed morally. Only biblical revelation can adequately form the fallen conscience. In a society that is infused with the Judeo-Christian worldview, the result is a moral consensus that extends maximal religious freedom to all, including those of every faith and no faith, while also guarding against ostensibly religious practices that do

¹⁹Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 65-68.

genuine harm to others. Henry's examples of the latter included Mormon polygamy and Hindu suttee.²⁰

Henry's third argument was that religious freedom was essential to all other human rights. It is, in fact, the wellspring of freedom, because religion, at least in theory, is interdependent with other human freedoms such as the freedom to assemble, a free press, freedom of expression, etc. Religious liberty is thus a comprehensive freedom that is dependent upon a theological basis, a truth Henry notes that both modern Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants also profess. It is no accident that when totalitarian regimes oppress human rights, whether they are guided by atheist ideologies or coercive expressions of theism, religious freedom is often one of the first rights to be targeted. Ensuring religious freedom for all is thus a matter of social justice. Christians should advocate for religious liberty in part because it a reminder that earthly governments never exercise ultimate claims over human beings. For their part, governments have a moral obligation to advocate for religious freedom when engaging in geo-political affairs, especially with other nations that deny religious liberty for all.²¹

Henry's final argument is that evangelicals have a particular obligation to defend religious freedom both at home and abroad. He makes five brief recommendations about evangelical advocacy. First, evangelicals should push back against government encroachment of religion in the United States. Secularism is inconsistent with the charter documents of the American founding, which are rooted in Judeo-Christian reasoning. Second, as a general rule Christians should obey civil laws, except when those laws themselves violate Christian consciences due to the immorality of leaders or the injustice of the laws. Furthermore, evangelicals should not defend the right of others to misuse or exploit religious liberty in ways that harm people, including the implementation of Sharia law by Muslims or abusive practices within quasi-Christian cults. Third, evangelicals must defend religious liberty for all people, regardless of their religious commitments, while also exercising their own freedom to evangelize non-Christians of all sorts. When a nation rejects a confessional identity and protects the right of voluntary and uncoerced faith, it fosters religious pluralism and guarantees the free and open proclamation of the

²⁰Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 68-72.

²¹Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 72-78.

gospel in the marketplace of ideas.²²

Henry's final two recommendations related to evangelical partnership with non-evangelicals. He argued evangelicals should partner with likeminded Jews in advocating for religious freedom in Israel. America's Judeo-Christian pluralism has benefitted both Jews and Christians, and the same could be true in Israel, where sometimes Christians (and other religious minorities) have been harassed by Jewish extremists. Henry also argued for collaboration with secular humanists who are committed to religious liberty for all, even though the latter lack a coherent theological rationale for that commitment. Both groups can stand together strategically against totalitarian threats to religious freedom and related human rights.²³ Henry's five recommendations were not a fully developed program for evangelical advocacy, but rather represented priorities to be pursued by evangelicals committed to religious liberty in the mid-1980s.

OTHER WRITINGS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE 1980S AND 1990S

While "The Cornerstone of Human Rights" represented Henry's lengthiest statement on religious liberty, it was not the only place where he addressed the topic during this period. Though none of Henry's other writings focused exclusively or exhaustively on religious freedom, the theme intersected with many of his other reflections on the state of American society. His arguments in these other writings were consistent with "The Cornerstone of Human Rights" and filled out his beliefs about religious liberty in a nation that was deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition but was increasingly rejecting its heritage in favor of secularist irreligion and neo-pagan decadence.

In an essay that originated as a 1983 speech to the National Religious Broadcasters, Henry argued religious freedom was a key distinctive of American society. He conceded that it accommodated irreligion. However, he also believed this accommodation was ultimately virtuous. He argued, "The fact that human liberty is divorced increasingly from supernatural accountability may well become our national undoing. Yet a forced religious commitment is of no value either to God or to man. Freedom to worship and serve the living God shelters all our other human liberties."²⁴ A 1982

²²Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 78-79.

²³Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 80.

²⁴Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 11.

lecture at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary complemented these observations with a greater evangelistic emphasis. Henry suggested that “In eliciting human decision for Christ we should emphasize that religious freedom is the ideal context in which human beings make their spiritual commitments. An earthly society in which man is free to choose atheism is better than one in which he is compelled to choose theism.”²⁵ Henry believed that evangelicals should be the greatest champions of religious liberty in an age where freedom is threatened by atheistic totalitarianism and religious despotism.²⁶

A persistent theme for Henry was that evangelicals must advocate for religious freedom for all, and not just religious freedom for Christians. In a 1982 essay first published for the *Christian Legal Society Quarterly*, Henry argued that religious liberty represented a crisis in Christian political witness. Too many conservative Christians championed their own freedom but did not grant the same freedom for other religions. According to Henry,

Christians should be perceived in public affairs not merely as proponents of their own rights, but first of all as spokespersons for universal human dignity and rights under God, for disputing the pretensions of tyrannical rulers to absolute sovereignty over human life, and for promoting as the highest priority for all persons the individual’s right to appeal to God’s will and to a good conscience. Christians should champion and preserve constitutional guarantees of religious freedom for all persons as a fundamental human and civic right.²⁷

Henry certainly understood why some Christians might be hesitant to affirm religious freedom for all. As he acknowledged in a 1987 address at Fuller Theologically Seminary, American evangelicals were concerned about resurgent neo-paganism as non-Christian religions were experiencing growth. This trend, fueled by immigration and refugees, threatened to further erode the influence of the Judeo-Christian worldview on American society at a time when secular humanism had already become ascendant among many cultural elites. Yet, Henry believed that the response to both

²⁵Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 59.

²⁶Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 59.

²⁷Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 101.

secularism and neo-paganism was not to curtail the religious freedom of non-Christians, but to advocate for religious freedom for all. In fact, he believed this posture was the foremost test of a good evangelical conscience because evangelicals, of all Christians, understood the importance of voluntary religion. Coerced faith leads to religious nominalism, which ultimately undermines all sincere religion, whether evangelical or pagan. Conservative Christians should defend religious freedom for all people and, in the context of that freedom, make a case for revealed religion while trusting the Holy Spirit to change lives.²⁸

Henry believed one of the weaknesses of the Religious Right was the movement's failure to offer a full-throated defense of religious freedom for non-Christians, which was a topic that he addressed in a 1989 essay on evangelical co-belligerency published first in *Christianity Today*. Henry acknowledged that the Religious Right normally appealed to religious freedom for all in principle. However, he lamented that, in practice, many socially conservative evangelicals pushed back against encroachments on the religious liberty of Christians while expressing little concern for the religious liberty of non-Christians. This posture gave ammunition to the movement's critics, who suggested that evangelical political engagement posed a threat to non-evangelicals. Henry argued that "A more disciplined public philosophy would have avoided such selectivity, however, and would have first of all stressed religious freedom for all persons of whatever faith."²⁹

Like most Baptists historically, but not all conservative evangelicals, Henry affirmed the separation of church and state. In the aforementioned essay in the *Christian Legal Society Quarterly*, Henry argued against government coercion of religion. "The use of political means to enforce sectarian principles in a pluralistic society has no biblical legitimacy and is incompatible with church-state separation."³⁰ In his 1989 essay on evangelical co-belligerency, Henry also made clear that his understanding of church-state separation was consistent with the American Founding Fathers and was not sympathetic to contemporary atheistic understandings of the principle.

The American founding fathers would consider utterly repulsive the Soviet view of absolute church-state separation which

²⁸Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 175-76.

²⁹Henry, *Gods of This Age or the God of the Ages?*, 189.

³⁰Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 115.

enthroned the state as the ultimate source and stipulator of human rights, denied the public significance of religion, and prohibited public evangelism. The American Constitution, by contrast, embodies the two great principles of nonestablishment and of free exercise.³¹

Henry had long advocated for a Christ-centered cultural witness, so he made clear that church-state separation did not mean Christians should withdraw from political engagement. Henry also cared about the free proclamation of the gospel, which he believed was best protected in the context of a free church in a free state. In a 1990 speech, published four years later, Henry claimed, “The Constitutional principles of free exercise and non-establishment permit public proclamation and evangelism promotive of one’s religious beliefs.”³²

Henry’s final book, published in 1996, was titled *Has Democracy Had Its Day?* This short work was expanded from a 1995 lecture first delivered to the Acton Institute. Henry discussed religious liberty at several points in the book, offering what would be his final word on the topic. Henry commended liberal democracy as the best form of government in a fallen world. He wrote,

A democratic political context appears the most promising framework for fulfilling the public duties incumbent upon human beings. A democratically chosen and constitutionally limited government seems to be the political structure most compatible with the Christian insistence on human worth and liberty and most likely to accommodate the promotion and protection on human freedoms, justice, and peace.³³

Echoing Richard John Neuhaus’s arguments in his seminal 1984 book *The Naked Public Square*, Henry argued against both the overturning of church-state separation, which would politicize religion, and atheistic understandings of church and state that emptied the public square of religious voices. He believed, “Only a church that carefully balances both spiritual mission and political participation can serve well the interests

³¹Henry, *Gods of This Age or the God of the Ages?*, 181.

³²Henry, *Gods of This Age or the God of the Ages?*, 22.

³³Henry, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?*, 6.

both of its Lord and a democratic society."³⁴ Henry summarized the arguments for religious liberty he had been making throughout his career, and especially over the past two decades.

True freedom is whole, and indivisible—it embraces political freedom, moral freedom, spiritual freedom, freedom of thought, freedom of belief, freedom of expression, free enterprise, a free press, free elections, but supremely, freedom to perform the will of God. Religious freedom is basic to all else; it offers humankind not only freedom to not to worship Caesar, but freedom to worship Caesar's God, who is the ground of all human rights and duties.³⁵

HENRY'S LEGACY AMONG CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN BAPTISTS

Carl F. H. Henry offered a distinctive perspective on religious freedom and its enduring importance for American society and the wider world. Like the Religious Right, which Henry never fully embraced, he argued that America was a nation shaped profoundly by the Judeo-Christian tradition, though America had squandered much of that heritage under the influence of secularism and was in desperate need of national renewal. But like most Baptists from the seventeenth century onward, Henry rejected religious establishments, denounced religious coercion as a violation of conscience, and advocated for religious liberty for all people. Religious freedom was the fundamental human right, a truth that ought to be affirmed by all, ideally because it reflected biblical reasoning rather than secular understandings of religious pluralism. Though religious liberty protects the rights of adherents of false religions and proponents of irreligion, it also guarantees the freedom of Christians to proclaim the gospel to unbelievers.

Henry's theologically conservative articulation of religious liberty was evangelical and Baptist, but it was also socially conservative and patriotic, fashioned in the context of Cold War concerns about the advance of atheistic communism. Even as the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended in 1991, Henry's views resonated with and were echoed by many of the inerrantist scholars who shaped conservative Southern Baptist theology and ethics from the 1990s onward.³⁶ As Barry Hankins argues, "It would

³⁴Henry, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?*, 38. See also Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans, 1986).

³⁵Henry, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?*, 48.

³⁶See Timothy D. Padgett, "Carl F. H. Henry, the Principled Patriot?" *Trinity Journal* 35.1 (2014):

not be going too far to say that Henry has been a mentor for nearly the entire SBC conservative movement.³⁷ Henry spoke at the installation services for Richard Land as president of the Christian Life Commission in 1988, Timothy George as founding dean of Beeson Divinity School in 1990, Albert Mohler as president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1993, and Mark Coppenger as president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1995.³⁸ Henry's views on church and state in general, and religious liberty in particular, found far more purchase among these resurgent Southern Baptist conservatives than the moderate views that predominated among Convention leaders from the 1950s into the 1990s.

Religious liberty and related topics were persistent themes in the ministries of Land and Mohler, who were arguably the two leading Southern Baptist public intellectuals from the mid-1990s onward.³⁹ Both men regularly cited the influence of Henry on their thinking, and each took intentional steps to make Henry's views on American society, the relationship between faith and culture, and religious freedom widely accessible. Mohler edited a 1994 collection of Henry's essays, *Gods of This Age or God of the Ages?* That volume included several chapters that touched upon religious freedom, including the published version of Henry's address at Land's installation service at the Christian Life Commission.⁴⁰ For his part, Land published Henry's *Has Democracy Had Its Day?* in 1996 and wrote the foreword to the first edition.⁴¹ Notably, Henry spoke regularly

93-109.

³⁷Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 22.

³⁸In 1997, the Christian Life Commission was renamed the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

³⁹For representative examples, see Richard Land, "The Great Commission Imperative: Proclaiming God's Truth in Word and Deed," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1.4 (Winter 1997): 62-70; Richard Land, "The Role of Religious Liberty in the Founding and Development of America," in *First Freedom: The Baptist Perspective on Religious Liberty*, eds. Jason G. Duesing, Malcolm B. Yarnell III, and Thomas White (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), 95-110; Richard Land, *The Divided States of America: What Liberals and Conservatives Get Wrong about Faith and Politics* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011); R. Albert Mohler Jr., "The Gathering Storm: Religious Liberty in the Wake of the Sexual Revolution," in *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Liberty*, 2nd ed., eds. Jason G. Duesing, Malcolm B. Yarnell III, and Thomas White (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 169-80; R. Albert Mohler Jr., *The Gathering Storm: Secularism, Culture, and the Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2020), 163-88; R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Baptists and the Contemporary Challenge to Religious Liberty," in *Baptist Political Theology*, 549-69.

⁴⁰Henry, *Gods of This Age or the God of the Ages?*, 171-84.

⁴¹Land's introduction is found in the first edition of the booklet. See Carl F. H. Henry, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?* (Nashville, TN: Christian Life Commission, 1996), iii-v.

at Christian Life Commission events in the 1990s and was appointed as a senior research professor at Southern Seminary, maintaining ties to Land's and Mohler's respective institutions during his later years.

More recently, younger Southern Baptist scholars who came of age after the Inerrancy Controversy have drawn upon Henry in their own advocacy for Christian cultural engagement and religious liberty for all. Russell Moore served as founding director of the Carl F. H. Henry Institute for Cultural Engagement at Southern Seminary in 1998, and later became the seminary's chief academic officer for almost a decade before serving as Land's successor as president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission from 2013 to 2021. Moore wrote a number of works about Henry, cited Henry frequently in other works, wrote widely on religious liberty, and published the second edition of *Has Democracy Had Its Day?* in 2019, to which he contributed an afterword.⁴² Andrew Walker worked for Moore at the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission before joining the faculty of Southern Seminary in 2019 and becoming director of the seminary's Henry Institute. Walker is arguably the leading Southern Baptist scholar of religious liberty at present, he interacts with Henry in his writings on the topic, and he contributed the introduction to the second edition of *Has Democracy Had Its Day?*⁴³

In 2000, the Southern Baptist Convention voted to revise the Baptist Faith and Message so that it better represented the conservative theological and ethical consensus of the denomination.⁴⁴ Notably, the article on religious liberty was not revised. In fact, it has remained the same through

⁴²Henry's thought was a major theme in Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004). Moore's writings that focused more narrowly on Henry include Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*; Moore, "God, Revelation, and Community"; Russell D. Moore, "The Kingdom of God in the Social Ethics of Carl F. H. Henry: A Twenty-First Century Evangelical Reappraisal," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55.2 (June 2012): 377-97; Russell D. Moore, "Afterword," in Henry, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?*, 63-69; Russell D. Moore, "Foreword," in Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 11-21. Moore's writings about religious liberty include Russell D. Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2015), 138-60; Russell D. Moore, "Conservative Christians in an Era of Christian Conservatives: Reclaiming the Struggle for Religious Liberty from Cultural Captivity," in *First Freedom*, 2nd ed., 159-68; Russell D. Moore and Andrew T. Walker, *The Gospel and Religious Liberty* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2016).

⁴³See Moore and Walker, *The Gospel and Religious Liberty*; Andrew T. Walker, "Religious Liberty and the Public Square," in *First Freedom*, 2nd ed., 127-55; Andrew T. Walker, *Liberty for All: Defending Everyone's Religious Freedom in a Pluralistic Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2021), wherein Walker engages frequently with Henry; Andrew T. Walker, "Introduction," in Henry, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?*, ix-xiii.

⁴⁴A helpful Comparison Chart of the three revisions to *the Baptist Faith and Message* is available online at <https://bfm.sbc.net/comparison-chart/>.

all three editions of the Baptist Faith and Message in 1925, 1963, and 2000. For a century, the article has offered a classic Baptist summary of religious freedom for all. However, the confession's article on Christians and the Social Order was revised substantially in 2000 to more clearly reflect the conservative social ethics of most Southern Baptists. The revised article confessed,

In the spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, and vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death.⁴⁵

In addition, the statement on the Bible was also revised so that it was more consistent with biblical inerrancy and less amenable to non-evangelical accounts of bibliology.⁴⁶

The upshot to these revisions, as well as what was left unchanged, is that contemporary Southern Baptists articulate their ongoing commitment to religious liberty for all within the context of their broader commitment to theological and social conservatism. It is noteworthy that both Richard Land and Albert Mohler served on the committee that recommended these revisions to the Baptist Faith and Message.⁴⁷ They were, after all, protégés of Carl F. H. Henry, whose mature understanding of theology, the promises and perils of modern American society, and religious freedom anticipated the consensus that would be affirmed by Southern Baptists on the other side of the Inerrancy Controversy.

⁴⁵ *The Baptist Faith and Message* (2000), Article XV: The Christian and the Social Order, available online at <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/#xv>.

⁴⁶ *The Baptist Faith and Message* (2000), Article I: The Scriptures, available online at <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/#i>.

⁴⁷ The full membership of the *Baptist Faith and Message* Study Committee is available online at <https://bfm.sbc.net/study-committee-members/>. Land and Mohler also collaborated with Charles Kelley on a commentary on the revised confession. See Charles S. Kelley Jr., Richard D. Land, and R. Albert Mohler Jr., *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Christian Resources, 2007).

BACKUS TO THE FUTURE: Fighting for Religious Liberty in the Twenty-First Century

Daniel Darling*

In *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty Against the Oppressions of the Present Day*, a Baptist pastor in colonial Massachusetts penned these now-famous words:

Religious matters are to be separated from the jurisdiction of the state, not because they are beneath the interests of the state but, quite to the contrary, because they are too high and holy and thus are beyond the competence of the state.

God has appointed two kinds of government in the world, which are distinct in their nature, and ought never to be confounded together; one of which is called civil, the other ecclesiastical government.¹

Backus could not have known the new world these words helped bring into existence. Though the idea of religious liberty was not new to Backus and, in some form or another, has been around at least in part since the second century and Tertullian,² Backus and his contemporaries bequeathed to us a world where religious liberty is a reality, even if in imperfect forms. Three hundred years after the birth of this consequential man, Baptists are still wrestling with Backus's words as we contemplate freedom of religion in an increasingly confused age.

Whereas Backus and his contemporaries surveyed the wreckage of a too cozy alliance with the church and the state, the strong arm of government

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¹Isaac Backus, "An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty" (1773; accessed May 14, 2024, <https://classicaliberal.tripod.com/misc/appeal.html>).

²Robert Louis Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God* (Yale University Press, 2019).

often coming down on the side of one Christian tradition or the other, today Baptists wrestle with the wreckage of secularism. The strong arm of the government is often quick to push Christianity into the margins of private devotion.

On offer, as an antidote to a fraying social fabric are two competing visions. One, a small, but loud cohort of would-be magisterial Protestants casting their lonely eyes toward the state church of the medieval era. Another, a strict separationism which flinches at any intersection of Christianity and government. Ironically it is traditional Baptist theology, as confessed by Baptists, that might serve as an alternative to these, in the view of this author, aberrant approaches.³

WHAT BAPTISTS ARE SAYING

Backus's words, quoted above, which separate civil government from ecclesial government, were echoed in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, ratified 16 years later: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The federal government must not favor one religious tradition over another, nor may it interfere in the inner workings of a religion. Baptists can reasonably draw these beliefs from Scripture, particularly Jesus's words in the gospels (Matt. 22, Mark 12, Luke 20). The Lord declares some goods are appropriate to "render to Caesar," while others, such as the conscience, belong only to God. Paul makes the same distinction between ecclesial and civil government in 1 Timothy 2, urging his young protégé to plead for space between the state and the church.

Historic Baptist confessions have reflected this biblical theme of separation. The Second London Confession reads:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his word, or not contained in it. So that to believe such doctrines, or obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, an absolute and blind

³Jonathan Leeman, "A Baptist Third Way for Political Theology," *Mere Orthodoxy* (2022; accessed November 25, 2024, <https://mereorthodoxy.com/baptist-third-way-politics>).

obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience and reason also.⁴

This sentiment is echoed in the Philadelphia Confession (1742), as well as in the New Hampshire Confession (1883) and subsequent confessions. The 1925 Baptist Faith and Message builds on these with its article on religious liberty:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and he has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to his Word or not contained in it. Church and state should be separate. The state owes to the church protection and full freedom in the pursuit of its spiritual ends. In providing for such freedom no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the state more than others. Civil government being ordained of God, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God. The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work. The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends. The state has no right to impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind. The state has no right to impose taxes for the support of any form of religion. A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal, and this implies the right of free and unhindered access to God on the part of all men, and the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power.

The 1963 and 2000 renditions of the Baptist Faith and Message essentially copy the 1925 confession's article on religious liberty.⁵ This robust language, common in all three versions, both warns the church not to "resort to the civil power to carry out its work," and warns the state not to "impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind." Perhaps the most important phrase in this confession helps Baptists understand what to

⁴"Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience," in the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689).

⁵The religious liberty article was numbered XVIII in the 1925 version, XVII and in the 1963 and 2000 versions. "Comparison Chart - The Baptist Faith and Message" (accessed November 25, 2024, <https://bfm.sbc.net/comparison-chart/>).

seek in the exercise of their citizenship: “A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal.” This does not prescribe but necessarily implies a society of ordered liberty where the church is not hindered from her mission and where the church refuses to use the state to coerce belief.

WHAT BAPTISTS ARE NOT SAYING

Just as important as what Baptists, both in Backus’s day and in our day, are saying is what we are *not* saying. Baptists are not advocating that Christians withdraw from society, nor are Baptists advocating that Christians should stop influencing their government based on Christian principles. One only needs to read of Isaac Backus’s work with Thomas Jefferson and James Madison to pass the Bill of Rights in 1791 to dispel that myth.⁶

Our Southern Baptist confession contains a robust clause on Christian social involvement. Article 15 of the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message reads this way:

All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society. Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. In the spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, and vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death. Every Christian should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love. In order to promote these ends Christians should be ready to work with all men of good will in any

⁶Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (Basic Books, 2010); Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (B&H, 2015).

good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth.

Baptists have eagerly engaged in active citizenship for the duration of the American experiment and have boasted of their members on city councils, in statehouses, and in governor's mansions, as well as in the White House. As of this writing, the current speaker of the United States House of Representatives is Mike Johnson, a lifelong Southern Baptist. He is joined in our nation's Congress by several Southern Baptists, both in the House and in the Senate. Southern Baptists continue to fund a Washington D. C. office to advance Southern Baptist priorities such as religious liberty, human dignity, and international religious freedom. Despite the hysterical media outcries, these are not theocratic moves.

Some confuse Baptist beliefs on religious liberty with a strict separationism, advocating for a secularizing of the public square.⁷ Richard John Neuhaus aptly rendered this project theoretically impossible:

When . . . religious values and the institutions that bear them are excluded, the inescapable need to make public moral judgments will result in an elite construction of a normative morality from sources and principles not democratically recognized by the society. The truly naked public square is at best a transitional phenomenon. It is a vacuum waiting to be filled.⁸

The intent of Backus and his contemporaries was not to strip government of Christianity, force Christians out of government, or create a value-free public square. Their intention was to protect the church from government overreach and to prevent the establishment of a state church. Backus elsewhere advocated a "sweet harmony" between church and state. He also advocated for Christians to bring Christian ideals to bear on public policy.⁹

Backus understood that a thick, though uninhibited, Christianity was necessary for the survival of ordered liberty: "Rulers, ministers and people,

⁷Richard Land, *The Divided States of America? What Liberals and Conservatives Are Missing in the God-and-Country Shouting Match!* (Thomas Nelson, 2010).

⁸Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Eerdmans, 1984), 86.

⁹Isaac Backus, *A Fish Caught in His Own Net. An Examination of Nine Sermons, from Matt. 16. 18. Published Last Year, by Mr Joseph Fish of Stonington* (1768).

ought to improve all their influence, in their several stations, to promote and support true religion by gospel means and methods ... it surely is of infinite importance, that every lover of our dear country, be in earnest to have it saved from such iniquity, and from such ruin."¹⁰

It is good, therefore, and not against Baptist ideals, for America's founding documents to acknowledge that natural rights come from God.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Three centuries after the birth of Isaac Backus, the country he helped to found faces its own challenges. The United States of America requires a robust Baptist political theology that both draws on our historic inheritance and is applied to new threats against freedom of conscience.

One threat comes from the collision of religious liberty with the sexual revolution, whereby individual Christians and Christian organizations are pressed to violate their consciences. One example includes the forcing of Christian foster care and adoption agencies to abandon their beliefs about marriage to help place children in healthy families. Another example includes Christian institutions of higher education being pushed to modify their beliefs on sexual ethics to receive accreditation or participate in student loan programs. In a sense, these reflect attempts to establish a new religious orthodoxy, one that violates historic Christian beliefs.

Thankfully, the twenty-first century has witnessed successful jurisprudence, at the Supreme Court level, to maintain the social space that the Founders intended for people of faith. Yet Baptists must be vigilant and continue to be active in defending the rights, not only of Christians, but of all faiths, to practice freely.

Another threat comes from the small, but persistent chorus of self-proclaimed Christian nationalists¹¹ and Catholic integralists¹² who, dissatisfied with the fruits of modernity and decaying cultural norms, grow wistful for a new social arrangement with a more robustly Christian form of government. Many of these conversations are confined to the academy and niche online audiences, but they are gaining purchase among a younger

¹⁰Isaac Backus, *Government and Liberty Described; and Ecclesiastical Tyranny Exposed* (1778). Cf. "The local churches that Baptists everywhere cherish find greater security with a government that sees them as fundamental to its organizing principles, not potential threats." Flynn Evans, "Against Strict Separationism: The Viability of a (Civilly) Christian State in Baptist Perspective," *The London Lyceum* (accessed May 13, 2023, <https://thelondonlyceum.com/against-strict-separationism-viability/>).

¹¹Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2022).

¹²Patrick Deneen, *Regime Change: Towards a Postliberal Future* (Swift Press, 2023).

generation of pastors and academics. Baptists should meet this challenge, not with rank hostility to the genuine problems raised by our interlocutors, but with both a vigorous defense of religious liberty and an articulation of what robust citizenship looks like in an increasingly pluralistic age.

The final threat is related. While Baptists are rightly hesitant to claim the American experiment in ordered liberty makes the United States a “Christian nation,”¹³ we should not hesitate to accept that Christian ideals played a major role in shaping America.¹⁴ Furthermore, Baptists must not shy away from encouraging a sober yet active engagement in the culture in order to shape laws that affect the flourishing of our neighbors.¹⁵ Baptists cannot merely stand athwart the culture and yell “Backus.” We must be active in preserving, as “salt” and “light” (Matt. 5:13-16), the democracy bestowed upon us.

Ultimately, however, our culture will not “Christianize” through public policy, however important that is. Instead, we must be committed, through faithful obedience, to fulfill our God-given responsibility in the Great Commission. Evangelism, church planting, and discipleship in the power of the Spirit will prompt the most transformative renewal of American life.

¹³Ian M. Giatti, “Being a Patriotic American Doesn’t Make You a ‘Christian Nationalist’: Dr. Richard Land Weighs in on the Debate,” *Christian Post* (2022; <https://www.christianpost.com/news/being-a-patriotic-american-doesnt-make-you-a-christian-nationalist.html>).

¹⁴Mark David Hall, *Did America Have a Christian Founding? Separating Modern Myth from Historical Truth* (Thomas Nelson, 2020).

¹⁵Daniel Darling and Malcolm B. Yarnell III, “Sufficiency of Scripture and Public Theology,” in David S. Dockery and Yarnell, eds., *The Authority and Sufficiency of Scripture*, revised and expanded ed. (Seminary Hill Press, 2024).