

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

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### 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> A recent collection of Henry’s essays for

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<sup>1</sup>The 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).

<sup>2</sup>Quoted 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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*.<sup>5</sup>

Though Henry is identified primarily as an evangelical, he was also a Baptist for nearly all of his Christian life.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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

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8.4 (Winter 2004): 85.

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

<sup>4</sup>See 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*.

<sup>5</sup>Carl 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: Academic, 1990).

<sup>6</sup>From 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.

<sup>7</sup>The 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, even Baptist scholars with considerable sympathy for Henry's thought have accused him of having an underdeveloped ecclesiology.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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

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<sup>8</sup>All 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.

<sup>9</sup>Henry'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.

<sup>10</sup>For 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.

<sup>11</sup>See 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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*.<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup>For 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.

<sup>13</sup>Jason 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.

<sup>14</sup>Carl 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).<sup>15</sup> In 1996, Henry published his final short book, which also originated as a lecture, titled *Has Democracy Had Its Day?*<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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

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<sup>15</sup>Carl 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).

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

<sup>17</sup>Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 63.

<sup>18</sup>Henry, *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.<sup>19</sup>

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

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<sup>19</sup>Henry, *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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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

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<sup>20</sup>Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 68-72.

<sup>21</sup>Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 72-78.

gospel in the marketplace of ideas.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> 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."<sup>24</sup> A 1982

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<sup>22</sup>Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 78-79.

<sup>23</sup>Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 80.

<sup>24</sup>Henry, *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.”<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup>

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

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<sup>25</sup>Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 59.

<sup>26</sup>Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 59.

<sup>27</sup>Henry, *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.<sup>28</sup>

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."<sup>29</sup>

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."<sup>30</sup> 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

<sup>28</sup>Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 175-76.

<sup>29</sup>Henry, *Gods of This Age or the God of the Ages?*, 189.

<sup>30</sup>Henry, *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.<sup>31</sup>

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.”<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup>

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

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<sup>31</sup>Henry, *Gods of This Age or the God of the Ages?*, 181.

<sup>32</sup>Henry, *Gods of This Age or the God of the Ages?*, 22.

<sup>33</sup>Henry, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?*, 6.

both of its Lord and a democratic society."<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

### 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.<sup>36</sup> As Barry Hankins argues, "It would

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

<sup>35</sup>Henry, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?*, 48.

<sup>36</sup>See 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.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> For his part, Land published Henry's *Has Democracy Had Its Day?* in 1996 and wrote the foreword to the first edition.<sup>41</sup> Notably, Henry spoke regularly

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<sup>37</sup>Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 22.

<sup>38</sup>In 1997, the Christian Life Commission was renamed the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

<sup>39</sup>For 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.

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

<sup>41</sup>Land'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.<sup>42</sup> 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?*<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44</sup> Notably, the article on religious liberty was not revised. In fact, it has remained the same through

<sup>42</sup>Henry'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).

<sup>43</sup>See 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.

<sup>44</sup>A 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.<sup>45</sup>

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.<sup>46</sup>

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.<sup>47</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>47</sup> 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).