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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

Liberty of conscience required the courageous witness and wholehearted support of Baptists and other free church believers to enter the modern conversation and become a reality in so many contemporary cultures, most influentially through the historic development of the British and American constitutions. Baptist scholars have come to recognize that freedom of religion is the first and most consequential of all human freedoms. The development of human rights in the world today depends historically upon the witness of Baptists to their most treasured human right, this "first freedom" of universal religious liberty.[1]

The reason Baptists around the world argue passionately for freedom of religion, often at great personal cost imposed by secularists, other religious traditions, and other professed Christians, is because we believe it is grounded in, and therefore required by, both biblical revelation and general revelation. First, Holy Scripture makes every human being originally, currently, and finally accountable to God alone (Gen 2:16-17; Ezek 18; Rom 5:12; Rev 20:11-15). Second, God's Word also teaches that Jesus Christ alone is the one Mediator to whom all must look for salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim 2:5-6). Third, the conscience within every person bears witness both to the reality of the law of God and to the forthcoming judgment of God. The witness of the conscience may be ignored, misled, and seared by a person, but that fundamental witness remains and requires an account before the throne of God (Rom 2:14-16).

Fourth, Baptists recognize religious liberty coordinates with their need to obey the Great Commission of Jesus Christ (Matt 28:16-20). The authority of Christ compels us to witness of the salvation only available in him. The freedom that provides room for us to propagate our faith is integral to the very practice of our faith. Fifth, as seen in the arguments brought

[1]William R. Estep, *Revolution within the Revolution: The First Amendment in Historical Context*, 1612-1789 (1990); Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Liberty*, 2nd ed. (B&H Academic, 2016).

forward in some of the following essays, respect for liberty of conscience is part and parcel of the character of our incarnate Lord Jesus Christ and of his express will for Christians to follow him in carrying our crosses. We certainly don't put other people on crosses by binding their consciences.

The founder of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Benajah Harvey Carroll, rejoiced that in his day, others had come to appreciate as "notable among the Baptist doctrines," "Freedom of Conscience" and "Separation of Church and State." He reminded Roman Catholics and Protestants how they once held to "the unchristian and horrid maxim" of religious uniformity.[2] As he developed his argument for freedom of conscience, Carroll criticized Martin Luther, Henry VIII, and John Calvin, as well as Louis XV, the Congregationalists of New England, and the Episcopalians of Virginia for having denied human beings their God-given right. However, he thanked God that in his day, religious liberty was now "a familiar thing."[3] But maintaining this first freedom requires our vigilance, too, as this journal issue demonstrates.

The following essays, most of which were presented in the Baptist studies session chaired by Anthony Chute at the November 2024 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in San Diego, California, are arranged chronologically. First, Malcolm Yarnell of Southwestern Seminary reassesses the importance of Roger Williams for the development of religious liberty and demonstrates the necessity for his reception among Baptists. Second, Jason Duesing of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary reassesses the importance of Isaac Backus in the development of religious liberty in the United States against great odds. This volume honors the 300th birthday of Backus, so Duesing's essay represents a fulcrum for this issue. Third, John Wilsey of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary interacts with Alexis de Tocqueville and his idea of "two spirits" in American thought, interacting with the Baptist contribution to religious freedom.

Fourth, Nathan A. Finn of North Greenville University makes the transition from history to the contemporary conversation by discussing the thought of the noted evangelical theologian, Carl F. H. Henry, who had Baptist roots. Fifth, Daniel Darling applies the religious liberty arguments which Isaac Backus crafted in the eighteenth century to difficulties that challenge Baptists in the twenty-first century. Sixth, we honor Southwestern's legacy of advocacy for religious liberty among Southern

[2]Benajah Harvey Carroll, *Distinctive Baptist Principles* (Baptist Standard Bearer, 1903), 1.
[3]Carroll, *Distinctive Baptist Principles*, 6-8.

Baptists by reprinting James Leo Garrett's third Day-Higginbotham Lecture. Garrett offered numerous reasons for why defending religious liberty remains important. Finally, Blake McKinney of Texas Baptist College evaluates in a book note the ground-breaking volume, *Baptist Political Theology*, recently published by B&H Academic. We want to express our deep appreciation to Ashley Allen, Jim Smith, Michelle Workman, and Chris Kim for their capable assistance with this issue of the journal.

May Baptists continue to advocate for the utility of human governments and of human religious organizations even as they argue that those same institutions must respect the right of every human being to respond to God as led in conscience. May God use our courageous advocacy for liberty of conscience to manifest his great glory in this dark world.

David S. Dockery and Malcolm B. Yarnell III

ROGER WILLIAMS'S CONTRIBUTION TO RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND BAPTISTS:
A Reassessment

Malcolm B. Yarnell III*

Alone with his young family and suffering from illness, the pastor faced a horrific choice. It was January. A blizzard swept toward his home. He had to decide quickly between judicial death by the persecuting courts in his home country, or natural death by exposure in the wilderness outside his door. The year was 1636, and European civilization on the Atlantic coast of America consisted of a tiny number of widely scattered colonies.

The newest colony, which included Boston and Salem, was founded by the Massachusetts Bay Company. The Salem church's pastor had tested the utter limits of the Puritan hierarchy's patience. His theological commitments to Christ, pure worship, impartial justice, and liberty of conscience pushed the government to answer his challenge to their social order. Though peopled by nonconformists fleeing religious oppression, Massachusetts chose traditional hierarchy over radical truth.

Roger Williams faced the future alone but for God. This essay reassesses the thought of this maverick theologian. What, if anything, can he say about religious liberty for our day? Christian nationalism is on the rise in America again,[1] and some Baptists find it inviting.[2] A reassessment is overdue. Like Williams then, Baptists now face a choice. We may end up alone but for God. Yet truth must be pursued, even when magistrates and ministers fulminate.

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[1]Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Canon Press, 2022); Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (Harper, 2023).

[2]Albert Mohler, "What Is Missing from Our Constitutional Order? Our Government Should Acknowledge Christianity," *Christ Over All* (https://christoverall.com/article/concise/what-is-missing-from-our-constitutional-order-our-government-should-acknowledge-christianity/, 2024).

"I HAVE SEEN THE FACE OF GOD"

On the one hand, Williams faced the prospect of arrest and deportation to England, where he would be cast into prison as a radical Puritan. Archbishop William Laud was using both the High Commission, an enhanced ecclesiastical court, and the Star Chamber, a plenipotentiary royal court, to corral his politico-religious opposition. Problematic Puritans were being imprisoned, impoverished, and mutilated under Laud's church-state regime.[3] Those committed to prison often quickly perished.

Early modern prisons, with their cramped conditions, lack of basic provisions, and unchecked communicable diseases, brought early death to many helpless inhabitants. The congregation of one religious prisoner complained to a government committee about conditions in Newgate. Their petition ignored, Thomas Helwys, the first pastor of the first Baptist church in England, perished.[4] Williams grew up near Newgate and worshiped in the parish church of Holy Sepulchre, which adjoined that prison. Holy Sepulchre's former members included John Rogers, the first Protestant martyred by Mary, and John Smith, famously saved by the American woman Pocahontas. Williams knew too well of his likely fate if extradited.

On the other hand, he could leave his wife and child in their warm home and flee into the night. His tracks would be covered by the snow, immediately preserving his life, but the cold might kill him. A mercenary, Captain John Underhill, was leading troops toward his door with a warrant. A London-bound ship awaited the fugitive. Graciously, John Winthrop, sometime governor of Massachusetts, sent a private warning to Williams. While Winthrop disagreed with the pastor, he did not wish to see him die. But the author of the famous "City on a Hill" sermon offered little hope for life. The chances of an Englishman surviving alone in winter in this strange land, where many others recently perished, were slim.[5]

Williams decided to risk the frozen wilderness rather than "London's prototype of hell."[6] He ran for his life. He later wrote that he did "not know what Bread or Bed did meane" for more than three months. This devout Christian ran for his life, praying for divine guidance. Comparing his perilous ordeal with that of Jacob wrestling the angel of the Lord at Peniel,

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[3]Take as an example Laud's prosecution of William Prynne, whose ears were sawed off. Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Archbishop Laud*, 1573-1645, 2nd ed. (London: Orion, 2000), 159-66

[4]Joe Early Jr., *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys* (Mercer University Press, 2009), 44-45.

[5]Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 251.

[6]Stephen Halliday, *Newgate: London's Prototype of Hell* (London: Sutton, 2008), xi-xiv, 1-36.

he said it thoroughly transformed him: "I have seen the face of God."[7]

Cut off from kith and kin, still subject to arrest, Williams fled the territory. He asked the natives for permission to live. The interior of the continent was populated by men and women whose lands were increasingly claimed by European colonists. His own advocacy for the basic rights of the Americans was one of four issues which caused great offense to the state-church authorities. The charges against Williams during his banishment trial included:

> First, that we have not our land by patent from the King, but that the natives are the true owners of it, and that we ought to repent of such a receiving it by patent. Secondly, that it is not lawful to call a wicked person to swear, to pray, as being actions of God's Worship. Thirdly, that it is not lawful to hear any of the ministers of the parish assemblies in England. Fourthly, that the civil magistrate's power extends only to the bodies and goods, and outward state of men.[8]

Winthrop explained these charges in his journal. First, Williams denied a Christian prince could convey land owned by others. This pierced the economic heart of the colonial enterprise. Second, he objected to government courts requiring people to swear in the name of the Lord. Coerced oaths caused unbelievers to blaspheme God by prompting them "to take the name of the Lord in vain."[9] The third charge derived from the free church principle that state churches ought not be recognized, for they persecute the gathered saints.[10] The fourth charge had profound implications for religion and politics. Williams believed the true church, a holy institution, was given a spiritual purpose with spiritual means and officers to meet it. The church must be kept separate from the civil government with its civil purposes, civil officers, and civil means.

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[7]John M. Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul: Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty* (Viking, 2012), 214.

[8]Theodore P. Greene, ed., *Roger Williams and the Massachusetts Magistrates: Readings Selected by the Department of American Studies, Amherst College* (Boston: Heath, 1964), 4.

[9]Greene, *Roger Williams and the Massachusetts Magistrates*, 2; Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul,* 191-92.

[10]He judged the setting up of state religion to be "Antichrist." Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody* (1652), in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 7 vols. (Russell and Russell, 1963) [hereinafter *CWRW*], 4:58.

DOUBLY POIGNANT

After fleeing into the frigid wilderness and finding God, Williams made his way south, into the lands of the Wampanoag. They allowed him to settle among them. Their generosity signaled the origin of a new colony. The chief of the tribe gave Williams land from his heart, though the persecuted pastor tried to pay for it. That land is now known as Rhode Island. Giving praise to God for his survival and this gift, Williams named his small community, "Providence." In 1639, he became a founding member of its Baptist church, the first on the American continent.

John Cotton, the pastor of Boston's congregational church, began writing letters to the exile. One found its way through an Indian messenger that first year. Cotton was surprised Williams survived. The historian John Barry said the Puritan's letter was "marvelously taunting." Cotton told Williams that if he had "'perished' among the 'Barbarians … your bloode had been on your owne head; it was your sinne to procure it, and your sorrow to suffer it."[11] Cotton was either a master of cold comfort or upset the refugee eluded justice. It was likely the latter, for several prominent laymen reported that Cotton led the effort to banish Williams.[12]

The double pathos of this significant moment in both human and Christian history ought not be missed. In the first place, we must realize the Christian ideal of universal liberty of conscience was given room to flourish by the present of a pagan prince. Formal religious liberty depends for its birthplace upon the American Indian. The chief may have granted it for that purpose. Williams wrote that the Americans "have a modest Religious perswasion not to disturb any man, either themselves, Dutch, English, or any in their Conscience, and therefore say, Aquiewopwaūwash. Aquiewopwaūwock. *Peace, hold your peace*."[13]

This pagan gift should prevent presumptions that Christian ethical practices are better. The evidence for high morals among peoples in other religions must be admitted. Williams often highlighted instances in which American virtue showed itself superior to England and Europe.[14] God speaks to every conscience and grants common grace to whom he will. God alone must be honored for any good in this world. And Christians would be wise to appreciate those through whom his grace comes.

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[11]Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul,* 214.

[12]Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul,* 205.

[13]Williams, *A Key into the Language of America* (London, 1643), in *CWRW*, 1:153.

[14]Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, 158, 165.

The second pathos of this event was manifested in the person of John Cotton. New England's leading theologian was providentially granted his role. Cotton affirmed liberty of conscience, for he had felt pressure from Laud. However, he granted a strictly limited liberty. Cotton distinguished "conscience rightly informed" from "erroneous and blind conscience." The former may not be persecuted, but the latter may, "after admonition once or twice." Cotton also held to theological triage. "Things of lesser moment" are allowed, but heretics, due to their "boisterous and arrogant spirit," may "justly be punished."[15]

Cotton and Williams defended their positions, sending missives back and forth in letters and publications over many years. Cotton's hypocrisy, to which he was personally blind, served as a whetstone. Upon that stone Williams sharpened the first freedom of the American worldview. Religious liberty, held by Baptists before and after Williams, derives from Scripture and reason. Williams used it to cut through the fog of Christian nationalism in his day.

THE INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

It may be helpful to rehearse the intellectual context in which he developed. Williams's ideas were crafted with reference to radical religion, law and politics, and the English Civil War.

RADICAL RELIGION

The authorities of Massachusetts were so impressed by Williams upon his arrival in the colony that they offered him the pastorate of the Boston church. Williams could not in good conscience accept it, for he disliked their fellowship with the spiritually bankrupt Church of England. Following the logic of Baptists, Williams concluded Scripture required true believers to separate from false believers. The text which prompted Cotton's defense of persecution was written by John Murton, a General Baptist and "close prisoner in Newgate." Williams took the "Scriptures and Reasons" of Murton against persecution and sent them to Cotton.[16]

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[15]"The Answer of Mr. John Cotton, of Boston, in New England, to the Aforesaid Arguments against the Persecution for Cause of Conscience, Professedly Maintaining Persecution for Cause of Conscience," in Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience*, ed. Richard Groves (Mercer University Press, 2011) [hereinafter *Bloudy Tenent*], 19-20.

[16]"Scriptures and Reasons, Written Long Since by a Witness of Jesus Christ, Close Prisoner in Newgate, Against Persecution in Cause of Conscience, and Sent Some While Since to Mr. Cotton by a Friend, Who Thus Wrote," in Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 11-18.

Murton's argument for religious liberty,[17] thus provided the structure for their enlarging debate.

Murton came out of the General Baptist movement transplanted to English soil by Thomas Helwys. In 1612, Helwys published a provocative text shaped by precise eschatology and personalist anthropology. *The Mystery of Iniquity* advocated Baptist ecclesiology as alone faithful and argued religious liberty should be universal. Helwys wrote a pointed note on the flyleaf to King James I. It landed its brave author in Newgate Prison.[18] Helwys was the first person in England to argue that religious freedom, not mere toleration, should be legally recognized. His powerful idea outlasted his persecuted body. Williams embraced his idea and made it stick.

Williams knew all too well what could happen not just to a Puritan but to a Separatist like himself. The first two Stuart monarchs despised the Puritans, as much as Elizabeth, last of the Tudors, had. All three saw the radicals, which included Separatists and Anabaptists, as the worst. Arrested radicals were often executed after or allowed to die in prison in the latter part of the English Reformation.[19] Their ideas and practices were just too egalitarian to suffer.

LAW AND POLITICS

Williams was a religious radical with a unique legal education, having served as personal clerk to England's chief justice. Sir Edward Coke was the greatest legal commentator in British history and a real thorn in the side of James I and Charles I. Coke later sponsored Williams to attend Cambridge University. But first Williams learned from Coke, watching his mentor navigate the mercurial and bloody-minded politics of the court.

The early Stuarts created "*the divine right of kings*" from "*the Elizabethan world picture*." They believed God ordained a "great chain of being" and a strict social order. They presumed kings should rule over both the bodies and the souls of their subjects.[20] They ruled souls through the bishops they

[17]John Murton, *A Most Humble Supplication of the King's Majesty's Loyal Subjects* (1620), in Edward Bean Underhill, ed., *Tracts on Liberty of Conscience, 1614-1661* (Hanserd Knollys Society, 1848), 214-25.

[18]Yarnell, "'We Believe with the Heart and with the Mouth Confess': The Engaged Piety of the Early General Baptists," *Baptist Quarterly* 44 (2011): 36-58.

[19]Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Later Reformation in England*, 1547-1603, 2nd ed. (Palgrave, 2001), 127-34.

[20]John Neville Figgis, *The Divine Right of Kings* (Cambridge University Press, 1915); Arthur A. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Harvard University Press,

appointed. James believed religious power should be integrated with secular power, and that both derive through him. He expressed this integration negatively: "No bishop, no king."

Members of Parliament, who could levy taxes, and common law judges, who made legal rulings, alone stood in the way of the kings grasping equality with God. The Stuarts believed in *rex supra lex*,[21] but Edward Coke believed in *lex supra rex*. Coke, who was compared to Luther, restrained the king with the British constitution. That constitution began taking statutory form with the medieval Magna Charta's recognition of some personal legal rights. Coke used Magna Charta and common law precedent to expand those rights. Both as a judge in the highest courts of the land and as a leading MP, Coke repeatedly placed the law above the king. With uncanny courage and great skill, he reminded the reluctant monarchs of the superiority of law. He extolled the British constitution's guarantee of private property against the monarchy, and he defended consciences against episcopal efforts to bind them with *ex officio* oaths.[22]

Coke led the Puritans in Parliament to upend Charles's plans for taxes and brought Charles to sign the Petition of Right checking royal power. One of three documents in the British constitution, Winston Churchill deemed Coke's Petition of Right "the main foundation of English freedom."[23] Roger Williams worked with Coke in these same years. Later, in his first trip back to London after his banishment, the student continued his mentor's project to preserve the people's legal rights.

CIVIL WAR

However, Williams went beyond Coke in his work with the Civil War-era parliaments. Coke allowed for bishops; Williams gladly saw them go. Coke worked with the Puritans; Williams worked with radicals against Puritan MPs and Westminster divines. Williams wrote his most well-known theological works to sway London toward religious liberty.

1936); E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (Penguin, 1943); David Wootton, *Divine Right and Democracy: An Anthology of Political Writing in Stuart England* (Penguin, 1986).

[21] Johann P. Somerville, ed., *King James VI and I: Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), xv-xxviii.

[22] Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Reformation Revisited* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 201-36.

[23] "The Petition of Right" (1628), in Paul L. Hughes and Robert F. Fries, eds., *Crown and Parliament in Tudor-Stuart England: A Documentary Constitutional History, 1485-1714* (Putnam, 1959), 200-2; Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill, *History of the English Speaking Peoples* (Barnes & Noble, 1995), 172.

One member of parliament, named for the Separatist pastor Praisegod Barebones, was dominated by religious radicals that the now deceased Coke would have balked at helping.[24]

Through his government contacts, Williams obtained a unique charter for the colony of Rhode Island. It enshrined religious liberty, the first such constitutional document in world history. One of his powerful radical friends was Sir Henry Vane. Vane helped Williams gain protection for his colony from the continuing aggressions of Massachusetts Bay. The Puritans in the bay worried that Rhode Island would shelter radicals.[25] They banished Anne Hutchison for her unlicensed preaching. They put to death Mary Dyer as a Quaker.[26] And they flogged Obadiah Holmes for being boldly Baptist. Holmes's case sent Williams back to London a second time.[27]

Another friend was Oliver Cromwell, who led the effort to remove Charles as head of England by removing his bodily head. Cromwell became the effective head of England through the Protectorate established by the last of the Civil War parliaments.[28] Cromwell favored religious liberty. Such powerful friends proved helpful to Dissenters, at least until the Stuart monarchy was restored. Cromwell's grandson married the grandson of William Kiffen, the long-lived protector of the English Baptist movement in England. Their offspring continued to fight for religious liberty, two great grandsons dying in the Monmouth Rebellion, a precursor to the Glorious Revolution.[29]

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ROGER WILLIAMS TO RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

How shall we describe Williams's doctrine of religious liberty? Before restating it in a systematic way, we offer three preliminary notes.

Firstly, Williams was not an Enlightenment philosopher writing with primary appeal to reason and experience. He was active well before John Locke, whose writings inspired Enlightenment politicians like Thomas

[24]Jonathan Healey, *The Blazing World: A New History of Revolutionary England, 1603-1689* (Knopf, 2023), 280-89.

[25]Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul,* 257-312, 360-63.

[26]Robert J. Allison, *A Short History of Boston* (Carlisle: Applewood), 15-17.

[27]Williams, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody* (1652), in *CWRW*, 4:52-53.

[28]Anna Keay, *The Restless Republic: Britain without a Crown* (HarperCollins, 2022).

[29]Larry Kreitzer, *William Kiffen and his World (Part 2)* (Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2012), 290-93; Alfred W. Light, *Bunhill Fields*, 2nd ed. (Stoke-on-Trent: Tentmaker, 2003), 1:94-100.

Jefferson. Locke published his two great treatises on toleration after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Williams published his first great treatise, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience*, in 1644. Williams's second great treatise, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, was published in 1652.

While Locke was a professed Christian, contributing a famous phrase to our *Baptist Faith and Message*, he spoke primarily from the perspective of the human mind. Conversely, Williams spoke primarily as a theologian. While Locke loosened government control over religion, he limited toleration. Williams, to the contrary, extended religious liberty. Locke defended freedom abstractly from relative safety in the Netherlands; Williams spoke concretely from within the furnace of Puritan persecution.[30] But Williams also appealed to "reason" and "experience."[31] He protected liberty of conscience in all cultures by grounding it in general revelation.

Secondly, Williams was by no means a systematic writer. He wrote from within the cultural crucible even as he focused on the eternal and the worldly contents of the gold refined therein. The shape of his argument came from Murton and Cotton. Williams responded, according to the custom of the day, argument by argument. As a result, his major writings on religious liberty flow neither narratively nor systematically. He must be read contextually, and his theological gold must be separated from his opponent's dross.

Thirdly, like Edmund S. Morgan, I once doubted Williams was helpful. However, like Morgan, I have also come to see his profound genius. Morgan, a social historian, rightly described Williams as a "most original" and "powerful thinker," possessing "courage" and "zeal" with a "fertile mind." Morgan repackaged the general thought of Williams, making it accessible, because "his ideas exhibit an intricate and beautiful symmetry."[32] Below, I repackage Williams's doctrine of liberty of conscience in the form of systematic theology.

The precious jewel of religious liberty polished by Williams had eight facets: the divine authority of Jesus Christ, general revelation, one Lord over every conscience, the priority of New Testament revelation, truth as

[30]Yarnell, *John Locke's 'Letters of Gold': Universal Priesthood and t; idem, "The Baptists and John Locke," in the English Dissenting Theologians, 1688-1789* (Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2017); Thomas S. Kidd, Paul D. Miller, and Andrew T. Walker, eds., *Baptist Political Theology* (B&H Academic, 2023), 97-122.

[31]Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 6.

[32]Edmund S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: Church and State*, 2nd ed. (Norton, 2006), x-xi, xiii.

the highest authority, distinguishing the church, the eschatology of Jesus, and the present social order.

THE DIVINE AUTHORITY OF JESUS CHRIST

First, Roger Williams operated from the perspective of the express divine authority of Jesus Christ. The opening summary of *The Bloudy Tenent* began by observing the persecution of consciences was "not required nor accepted by Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace."[33] Similarly, the General Baptist document he quoted verbatim, at length, and as an authority for his own position began by exalting "the doctrine of Jesus Christ, the king of kings."[34] Williams then said "the sum of all true preaching of the gospel" is "that God anointed Jesus to be the sole King and Governor of all the Israel of God in spiritual and soul causes."[35] Christ alone is Lord and has personal authority over every conscience as well as the church and the state.

Williams was aware of how men attempt to compromise Christ's sole headship. He blasted those who arrogate their own rule by using the name of Christ in vain. Magistrates certainly must punish those who break the civil peace, yet their remit ends there. "But, to see all his subjects Christians, to keep such church or Christians in the purity of worship, and see them do their duty, this belongs to the head of the body, Christ Jesus, and such spiritual officers as he has to this purpose deputed, whose right it is according to the true pattern." Magistrates who claim Christ's rule over the state are "usurpers," not righteous like David.[36]

In 1644, he challenged the Presbyterian divines in the Westminster Assembly for presuming they might speak for Christ. He dismissed their appeal to the state churches of France, the Netherlands, Scotland, or New England. Instead, they should have consulted and obeyed Christ, our "Wonderful Counselor." Christ wants believers to work "according to his last will and testament." Only from his New Testament can we "highly exalt the name of the Son of God." Only by honoring Christ and using his means can men "provide for the peace of this distressed state, engage the souls of all that fear God," and "further the salvation of thousands."[37]

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[33]This precis begins systematically but then becomes a laundry list of arguments. Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 3. Underhill titled it a "Syllabus of the Work." Groves, "Preface," in Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, ix.

[34]Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 11.

[35]Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 41-42.

[36]Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 75-76.

[37]Williams, "Queries of Highest Consideration" (1644), in James Calvin Davis, ed., *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger Williams* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 75.

GENERAL REVELATION

Second, Williams believed in divine revelation. He addressed God's revelation of himself in its general and special ways. He said God reveals himself generally to everyone, including pagans. To the Americans God disclosed both that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. They experience God's operations of guilt and of praise in their consciences.[38] Pagans adopt religious forms, precisely because of God's convicting work. They understand the difference between good and evil, and of human failure to do good. Alas, however, they make their own prophets, priests, and kings, and rely upon their good works to save them.[39]

The Americans also recognized the soul went to a place like heaven or like hell after death.[40] Williams used these generally available truths as an opportunity to share the special revelation of God in Christ. He hoped for the salvation of the Americans, but he was not yet willing to institute Christian forms of worship among them, even at their request. True faith and repentance are required before Christian worship is proper.[41]

As mentioned, Williams discovered the Americans held to a form of liberty of conscience. This was further demonstration that persecution is contrary to God's will for humanity. Persecution violates not only the special revelation of God in Christ recorded in Holy Scripture. It also violates general revelation. Coercion is "opposite to the very tender bowels of humanity (how much more of Christianity!)"[42] Williams appealed not only to Scripture but also to reason and experience. The Enlightenment philosophers who later pursued religious liberty followed the trail blazed for them by this radical Christian.

ONE LORD OVER EVERY CONSCIENCE

Third, the presence of God to every human being, through his revelation of his will to their personal consciences, shaped Williams's approach to humanity, personal rights, and society. From Scripture, Williams learned that God spoke with great authority through the conscience (Rom. 2:14-16). He honored the soul and conscience in every human being, knowing that human beings form beliefs and perform actions in response to God's voice.

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[38]Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, 147-48.
[39]Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, 151-53.
[40]Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, 154, 159-60.
[41]Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, 155-57, 160.
[42]Williams, "Queries of Highest Consideration," 83.

For Williams, "Personal belief … resides at the core of human identity; it is an inalienable dimension of who we are that cannot be externally compelled to become something different than it is."[43] The human soul is "so precious," like "an invaluable jewel," and Christ is its only judge. Christ alone can establish "spiritual judicature," and he has given that responsibility to his church. The church exercises its responsibility through preaching the Word, which is the sword of the Spirit. When it comes to judgment of a conscience, "Such a sentence no civil judge can pass, such a death no civil sword can inflict."[44]

Williams wanted to see people worship God truly, but true worship occurs as the conscience works freely.[45] The spiritual transformation of the human conscience from believing falsely to believing truly in Christ comes only through the Word and the Spirit working upon the human will. A change in faith cannot be forced. True faith is voluntary. The church must be formed "voluntary" and dissolved "voluntary."[46] Moreover, true faith will carry its own cross. It certainly does not impose crosses upon other consciences.[47]

He warned Puritan politicians and Presbyterian divines to stop trying to establish religion by coercing consciences. His rhetoric waxed immortal when he placed the sole Lordship of Christ over every conscience and the preciousness of the human conscience in opposition to Christian nationalism. Religious coercion is a "bloody act of violence to the consciences of others." If Parliament were to establish religion, it will have "committed a greater rape than if they had forced or ravished all the bodies of the women in the world."[48]

Having tossed that inflammatory barb at both houses, he left London before his most famous book was published. *The Bloudy Tenent* sold out fast, prompting new editions. Declamations flew from Puritans in Parliament and Presbyterians in Westminster.[49] Parliament ordered his book burned publicly. The pyre for Williams's *magnum opus* was built in Smithfield, a

[43]James Calvin Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams: Christian Conviction and Public Ethics* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 53.

[44]Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 73.

[45]Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 47.

[46]Williams, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, in *CWRW*, 4:74.

[47]Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 48.

[48]Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 7.

[49]Even Prynne, although mutilated by Laud's High Commission, failed to see the truth of Williams's claims. Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul,* 337.

stone's throw from his old home, just down the street from Newgate.[50] This gory display of Christian nationalism provided the background against which his doctrine of soul liberty shined.

Even when consciences are persuaded toward Christian truth, Williams understood people would still believe various errors and still act sinfully. "It is no new thing for godly, and eminently godly men to perform ungodly actions; nor for ungodly persons to act what in itself is good and righteous."[51] Repeatedly, Williams showed how professed Christians fell into gross error, from Constantine in Byzantium to Cotton in Boston. Christians have no reason to claim they alone know how to live well, nor may they claim perfection.

The state must, therefore, be open to plural religions and different churches. The only way that social covenants can come into existence and work correctly, if imperfectly, is through respectful dialogue of souls listening to their consciences. This dialogue is open to all, no matter their religion. Williams embraced the natural law tradition developed through Aquinas and Calvin. He believed that, although it could be "refined," knowledge of God's general moral law was "common to all mankinde."[52] Divine revelation in the conscience was moving toward full historical expression.

THE PRIORITY OF NEW TESTAMENT REVELATION

Fourth, Williams believed God reveals himself through his special revelation of Scripture, and that Christ reveals his will for his church in the New Testament. Williams wanted to see others saved, so he used Scripture to speak God's Word to them. He also distinguished between the revelations of Moses and Christ. He dismissed the assumption that the nations of the British Isles or the American continent might somehow be equated with Israel. "And is this not a reviving of Moses, and the sanctifying of a new Land of Canaan, of which we hear nothing in the Testament of Christ Jesus, nor of any other holy nation but the particular Church of Christ (1 Peter 2:9)?"[53]

The only way the Bible can be used to support persecution is by instituting the ancient pattern of Moses. Drawing on the Christological typology

[50]Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul,* 320, 337-38.
[51]Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 111.
[52]Williams, *The Examiner Defended, In a Fair and Sober Answer* (1652), in *CWRW*, 7:241.
[53]Williams, "Queries of Highest Consideration," 77.

of the book of Hebrews, Williams responded, "Moses' shadows vanished at the coming of the Lord Jesus. Such a shadow [of persecution] is directly opposite to the very testament and coming of the Lord Jesus; opposite to the nature of a Christian church, the only holy nation and Israel of God" (Heb. 8:5; 10:1).[54] In other words, after Christ came, the way God works in the world shifted from a civil government within one nation to a spiritual government scattered among all nations. "The state of the land of Israel, the kings and people thereof, in peace and war, is proved figurative and ceremonial, and no pattern or precedent for any kingdom or civil state in the world to follow."[55]

TRUTH AS THE HIGHEST AUTHORITY

Fifth, Williams believed every authority to act must justify itself in truth. Authority is grounded in God. And every authority is given to Christ (Matt. 28:19), who is truth itself (John 14:6). One of the two dialogue partners in his *Bloody* books was "Truth." Williams remembered well a lesson he learned from Coke about the necessity of questioning even monarchical claims to authority. "Truth" said to "Peace," the other dialogue partner, "Well spoke that famous Elizabeth to her famous attorney, Sir Edward Coke: 'Mr. Attorney, go on as you have begun, and still plead, not *pro Domina Regina, but pro Domina Veritate*.'" England's most glorious queen, conversant in Latin, French, Italian, and Polish, instructed her attorney to pursue the authority of truth above the authority of the crown.

Coke passed on that critical lesson of grounding authority in truth to Williams. After suffering in the wilderness for his conscience, Williams never flinched from asking the authority question. He always voiced that which no megalomaniac wants to hear but which every public leader must answer, "By what authority?" With such boldness, it is no wonder the Massachusetts Puritans found him infuriating. After failing to imprison him, to rebut him, and to strangle his colony, later Puritans resorted to insulting him and obliquely defending Cotton.[56]

DISTINGUISHING THE CHURCH

Sixth, Williams separated the church from the city or nation in which it lived, and the church from the clergy. He noted often that the churches of

[54]Williams, "Queries of Highest Consideration," 83.

[55]Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 3.

[56]A. W. McClure, *John Cotton: Patriarch of New England*, ed. Nate Pickowicz (H&E, 2019), 88-89.

the New Testament were not identical with any of its cities. The churches of that day were different from the cities, and the horrific persecution believers suffered settled that fact. He distinguished city covenants from church covenants, and recognized that one's flourishing depended not on the other. "Thus in the city of Smyrna was the city itself or civil estate one thing, the spiritual or religious state of Smyrna another; the church of Christ in Smyrna distinct from them both. And the Synagogue of the Jews, … distinct from all these."[57]

Williams provided a litany of texts to show how Christ established his church separate from any nation. The church must never ask the civil sword to do its work. The state was established "to execute vengeance" against civil criminals with a "civil sword." Jesus told his disciples, when they were in a vengeful mood against their Master's detractors, "I came not to destroy men's lives but to save them." The "Lamb of God" told Peter to put his physical weapon down, "for all who take sword shall perish by the sword." He later told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight that I should not be delivered." Rather than crusading soldiers, Jesus called his followers to become cross-bearing servants: "If any man will follow me, let him take up his cross." Paul agreed, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus must suffer persecution."[58]

Williams was also jealous to preserve the church from clergy speaking without authorization. He recalled how the other New England ministers formed a tribunal and interfered in his own congregation.[59] He blasted the Westminster "assembly" of divines for presuming it could use that sacred name. "Pray you tell us where Christ Jesus has given you power to assume and appropriate such a title to yourselves, which seems in Scripture to be common to all the children of God?"[60] Williams did not suffer clerical arrogance to presume to speak for Christ or his church without express warrant. He obviously learned from Coke to question where every claim for human authority derived.

He advocated both a notional and a real separation between the church and the nation. The church is marked by its fidelity to the words and ways of Christ. It serves the world and preaches the Word. It suffers persecution;

[57]Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 40.

[58]Williams cites Rom. 13; Matt. 26; John 18:36; and 2 Tim. 4. Williams, "Queries of Highest Consideration," 79.

[59]Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul,* 191, 199-202.

[60]Williams, "Queries of Highest Consideration," 76.

it never offers persecution. The actions of the church are nonviolent: "The Word and prayer are those two great services of God."[61] The instruments of the church and the state are different, just as the goals of the church and the state are different. The state bears the physical sword; the church bears the spiritual sword.

In a most powerful passage in *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, Williams implied Cotton and the Puritans advocated persecution because they rejected the cross Christ gave them. "But the Truth is, this mingling of the church and the world together, and their orders and societies together, doth plainly discover, that such churches were never called out from the world, and that this is only a secret policy of the flesh and blood, to get protection from the world, and so to keep (with some little stilling of conscience) from the cross or gallows of Jesus Christ."[62]

Scripture teaches that "persecution is the common and ordinary portion of the Saints under the Gospel, though that cup be infinitely sweetend also to them that drink of it with Christ Jesus."[63] When Christians suffer, they suffer in Christ; when Christians are persecuted, Christ is persecuted. The Lamb and his disciples don't persecute.

THE ESCHATOLOGY OF JESUS AND THE PRESENT SOCIAL ORDER

Seventeenth-century English society was immersed in eschatology. Many believers felt led to oppose the Antichrist by imposing God's will on society. Radical groups from the Ranters to Fifth Monarchists supposed their agendas most "godly." The religious stage was set for a militant revolution.[64] In the New World, "The founders of the Massachusetts Bay Company intended to erect in England a 'bulwark against the kingdom of Antichrist.'" Increase Mather, Cotton's grandson, "believed that religious toleration would open the door to Antichrist."[65]

Williams was caught up in eschatology, too, and he subjected the civil order to the coming eschatological judgment of Christ. However, his approach to society differed from Puritan enthusiasm. Williams often spoke of "the Lamb," but unlike the religious militants, he focused on its

[61]Williams, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, 66.

[62]Williams, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, 74-75.

[63]Williams, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, 75.

[64]Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (Penguin, 1975).

[65]Christopher Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (Verso, 1990), 183-84.

pacifistic sense. He began his dialogue with this reminder from Truth:

> Patience, sweet Peace, these heavens and earth are growing old, and shall be changed like a garment. They shall melt away, and be burnt up with all the works that are therein; and the Most High Eternal Creator shall gloriously create new heavens and new earth, wherein dwells righteousness. Our kisses then shall have their endless date of pure and sweetest joys. Till then both you and I must hope, and wait, and bear the fury of the dragon's wrath, whose monstrous lies and furies shall with himself be cast into the lake of fire, the second death.[66]

Williams wanted to separate the church from the state to provide space for religious dissenters preparing for Christ's return. He believed an agreed social order of some type remained necessary and privately encouraged citizens in his territory to refrain "pretending conscience."[67] On the one hand, he refused to engage in religious militarism. On the other hand, he refused to forsake society. He encouraged the citizens of Providence to be responsible. And he called upon the Quakers to protect not only their own consciences but those of others.[68]

While Williams looked at this present world with sobriety, the New England Puritans gave vent to eschatological enthusiasm. They wanted "to make society a godly kingdom."[69] Winthrop wrote his great sermon while he sailed with well-financed emigrants intent upon establishing an ideal "Citty upon a Hill." More than offering inspiration, Winthrop as governor was defining a "Covenant with God."[70] His social covenant provided a rhetorical flourish for future American presidents, but it was utopian, hierarchical, and intolerant in its day.

Winthrop's first sentence disclosed his faith in a hierarchy that must be embraced, though he admitted it was based in general revelation. Nonetheless, it bound consciences. "God Almightie in his most holie and wise providence hath soe disposed of the Condicion of mankinde, as

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[66]Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 28.

[67]Davis, "Roger Williams," in Kidd, Miller, and Walker, eds., *Baptist Political Theology*, 88-92.

[68]Edwin S. Gaustad, *Roger Williams* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 106-8.

[69]Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

[70]John Winthrop, "Christian Charitie. A Modell Hereof." in Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *Puritan Political Ideas 1558-1794* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 91-92.

in all times some must be rich some poore, some highe and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subjeccion."[71] Speculations about human authority and subjection undergirded Puritan political theology.

Winthrop said God was establishing this social order in the New World for three reasons. First, the preservation of the whole community and the glory of God depended upon his "ordering of all these differences." Second, the "worke of his Spirit" would be seen in restraining the wickedness of any who rebelled. Third, everyone must submit to this order, that "they might be all knit more nearly together in the Bond of brotherly affeccion."[72]

His delineation of the membership and governance of this new commonwealth explains why he and Williams parted ways. First, Winthrop said the members of the utopian commonwealth of Massachusetts must all be professed Christians. Second, they must live "under a due forme of Government both civil and ecclesiasticall." Third, displaying his utopianism, he said his government's end was to preserve the people from the corruptions of the world. Fourth, the way to utopia was through "Conformity."[73]

Winthrop ended with two longlasting ideas which brought harm not only to Williams, but to all dissenters. First, Winthrop said their covenant was the will of God. Channeling Moses, Winthrop located the articles of the covenant among God's commandments, ordinances, and laws. The modern Christian nationalist tendency to locate the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution of the United States with Scripture, finds precedent here. Second, Winthrop offered an early example of the quintessential American heresy of the prosperity gospel. He argued that violating the social covenant in any way would bring curses, but obeying it would bring "a blessing upon us in all our ways."[74]

Williams's view of civil order was neither naïve nor enthusiastic. He knew the sinfulness of humanity. He could rehearse the ways in which the intolerant governments of England, from Henry VIII to Charles I, persecuted Christians. He remembered how hundreds of thousands died in the religiously inspired devastations of the Thirty Years War. He personally witnessed kings, parliaments, preachers, assemblies, and colonial

[71]Winthrop, "Christian Charitie," 76.
[72]Winthrop, "Christian Charitie," 76-77.
[73]Winthrop, "Christian Charitie," 90-91.
[74]Winthrop, "Christian Charitie," 92-93.

governments violate the will of God, usurp Christ's authority, and persecute Christ in his members.[75] His own life was only preserved by divine providence through a pagan conscience. Williams understood the present misery and misconduct of all human beings, whether they professed faith or not. He was no utopian.

The most hotly contested biblical passage in the Williams–Cotton debate concerned the future, at least according to Williams. Following the persecuting hermeneutic that originated with Augustine and continued through Calvin, Cotton read Matthew 13 as realized eschatology. But in his personal exegesis of the parable of the wheat and tares, the Lord located the bodily judgment of unbelievers in the world at the end of the age and appointed angels his executors (Matt. 13:37-43). Augustine, Calvin, and Cotton minimized Christ's hermeneutic and conflated world with church, final judgment with excommunication, and angels with magistrates. Williams repeatedly took Cotton to the exegetical woodshed for perverting God's own eschatology.[76]

Williams knew this age was not the kingdom. Those primarily interested in building cities on little hills should recall the heavenly city being prepared in glory. Rather than fashioning false utopias here, he viewed this life as a journey. "When life seemed hard and thoughts grew dark, it was time, Williams wrote, to remember that we are on this earth, 'like passengers on a ship,' making our way to a heavenly home. If defeated now, we shall be victorious then; if despised and persecuted now, we shall be crowned and treated as royalty then." True believers hope for a "neverending harvest of inconceivable joys" then, not now.[77]

ROGER WILLIAMS AMONG THE BAPTISTS

Baptists have long claimed both Roger Williams and his arguments for liberty of conscience and the separation of church and state as their own. The first extensive biography of Williams was written by an American Baptist, James D. Knowles, in 1834.[78] The most recent defense of the Baptist doctrine of religious liberty, which honored Williams first among

[75]Gaustad, *Roger Williams*, 105.

[76]On Augustine and Calvin, see Yarnell, "The Development of Religious Liberty: A Survey of its Progress and Challenges in Christian History," *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 6.1 (Spring 2009): 119-38. On Cotton, see Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent*, 55-59; idem, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, 114-30.

[77]Gaustad, *Roger Williams*, 109.

[78]Knowles, *Memoir of Roger Williams*, in Greene, ed., *Roger Williams and the Massachusetts Magistrates*, 23-25.

individual Particular Baptists, was written by a British Baptist, Ryan Burton King, in 2024.[79] Williams was honored with the first individual chapter in the groundbreaking volume of essays, *Baptist Political Theology*. That chapter asserted that "few thinkers are more important to *Baptist political theology* than Williams" and that his commitment was "formative for later generations of Baptist thinkers."[80] John Leland, Isaac Backus, George W. Truett, among other Baptist theologians, developed their arguments from Williams.

Williams borrowed his central arguments for liberty of conscience from the General Baptist John Murton. In his *Humble Supplication*, Murton assigned interpretation of Scripture to all those who received the Spirit of God. Clergy, councils, and magistrates often erred, as seen in their resort to antichristian persecution.[81] Williams pulled Murton's next four chapters verbatim. First, Murton and Williams argued from the commands of Christ in Scripture. Second, they appealed to the statements and policies of "famous princes." Third, they cited theologians from the early church to the Reformation. Fourth, they showed how religious liberty does not harm but assists the commonwealth.[82]

Williams was a founding member of the first Baptist church gathered on the American continent. While he did not stay a member, concerned about their authority to baptize, he worked closely with Baptists. Williams traveled with John Clarke, the pastor of the second Baptist church in America,[83] and with the Quakers, William and Mary Dyer, to London to defend religious liberty, driven there by Cotton's bloody claim that denying infant baptism was a capital offense.[84] Williams prepared a presentation copy of his second great work, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, inscribing the flyleaf, "For his honoured and beloved John Clarke, an eminent witnes of Christ Jesus, ag'st ye bloodie Doctrine of persecution, etc." Clarke's copy made its way into the library of Isaac Backus, who gave it to Brown University. That copy was used for the scholarly edition of Williams's complete writings.[85]

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[79]King, *Every Man's Conscience: Early English Baptists and the Fight for Religious Liberty* (H&E Academic, 2024), 53-57.

[80]Davis, "Roger Williams," 73.

[81]Murton, *Humble Supplication*, 189-214.

[82]Cf. Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 11-18; Murton, *Humble Supplication*, 214-25.

[83]David W. Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Baylor University Press, 2010), 49.

[84]Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul,* 355.

[85]Williams, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, ix.

Williams was not only helpful in advancing the liberty of every conscience and the institutional separation of church and state. Williams also treasured the voluntary principle of religion. Walter Shurden and Bill Brackney considered the voluntary principle foundational for a believer's church identity. Shurden said voluntarism "impacts three basic Baptist principles." First, "God left each individual free to affirm Christ as Lord of life." Second, in Baptist churches, "Christians voluntarily covenant together with others who have trusted Christ as Lord of their lives, and, under God's Spirit, create together a local believer's church." And third, "in terms of the state, the voluntary principle in religion shaped Baptists into ardent advocates of liberty of conscience, including freedom of religion, freedom for religion, and freedom from religion."[86]

In his 1976 lectures on religious liberty, the one person to whom James Leo Garrett Jr., dean of Southern Baptist theologians, paid greatest attention was Roger Williams.[87] "Williams's two monumental treatises constituted … 'a veritable Summa on freedom of conscience and on the nature of the powers of the state.'"[88] Garrett argued at length that Baptists must continue to fight for religious liberty.[89] In 2005, Edwin S. Gaustad wrote, "Americans in the twenty-first century may have some difficulty accepting the idea that one had to fight valiantly and fearlessly, for religious liberty."[90] He credited Williams for winning this great battle for us.

Alas, four centuries after Williams, a half century after Garrett, and two decades after Gaustad, aggressive "Christian" nationalism again threatens human liberty. True Baptists must join Roger Williams in the war for truth, expecting no peace from persecutors.

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[86]Walter Shurden, "Series Foreword," in Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, xiv-xv. Cf. William H. Brackney, ed., *The Believers Church: A Voluntary Church* (Pandora, 1998).

[87]Garrett, "Day-Higginbotham Lectures, Part 2," in Wyman Lewis Richardson, ed., *The Collected Writings of James Leo Garrett Jr. 1950-2015*, vol. 7: Church, State, and Religious Liberty (Wipf and Stock, 2023), 98-109.

[88]Garrett, "Day-Higginbotham Lectures, Part 2," 109.

[89]Garrett, "Day-Higginbotham Lectures, Part 3," 123-36. See the reprint of that lecture, originally published in this journal in 1976, in the seventh article in this issue of the journal.

[90]Gaustad, *Roger Williams*, 86.

ISAAC BACKUS AND BAPTIST HISTORY:
Assessing a "Pioneer Champion of Religious Liberty"

Jason G. Duesing*

B. R. WHITE, ISAAC BACKUS, AND BAPTIST HISTORY

Perhaps there is no historical artifact more biased than the tombstone. The inscriptions used, though brief and, likely, because of the required brevity, tell only the best about a life, or, at least, shed the best light possible. The grave of Isaac Backus (1724-1806), erected years after his death to memorialize him, summarizes his life, in part, as "a pioneer champion of religious liberty." As this year marks the three-hundredth anniversary of his birth, I aim to ask whether this perspective, though biased, is accurate. And I'd like to think I do so in good company.

At an address given at the annual meeting of the Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention in April 1969, the British Baptist historian, Barrington Raymond White (1934-2016), started his opening address by asking the question, "Why bother with history?" Therein, he sought to raise questions about the study of Baptist history in comparison to other types of history.[1] Positing that Baptist historians should "ask questions about the bias and interests of the Baptist Historians who are our forerunners," White noted the errors he encountered while researching the source work of the first English Baptist historian, Thomas Crosby (1683-1752). Questioning why earlier Baptist historians used the sources they used, told the stories they told or did not tell, is the type of bias analysis,

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[1]B. R. White, "Why Bother with History?" *Baptist History & Heritage* 4:2 (July 1969): 77-88. White's original address was titled, "Why Bother about History?" See "Annual Meeting Sound Recording," Southern Baptist Historical Society (1969 April 23-25), Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives [SBHLA], Nashville, Tennessee.

White relayed, "where considerable fresh work is needed."[2] Indeed, White shared, this is how he arrived at the subject for his concluding address to the Historical Commission. Just as he analyzed the biases of the first English Baptist historian, he intended to do the same with the first Baptist historian in America, Isaac Backus.[3]

In that address, "Isaac Backus and Baptist History," White, with some irony, gave a sympathetic and biased portrayal of Backus as, himself, a sympathetic and biased Baptist historian.[4] Isaac Backus wrote his four volume *A History of New England with Particular Reference to the … Baptists* throughout the course of his public ministry (1777-1804) and during the time at which America formed as a nation following revolution. As he recounted the events that led to the new nation's freedom, Backus also wrote with the survival and freedom of Baptist churches in mind. White summarized, "Backus was no armchair historian: his was crusading history, passionate history, a record of past events made by a man whose eyes were firmly fixed on the necessity of setting that record straight for the sake of the future."[5] As we will note, Backus's *History of New England* served to complement Backus's larger cultural engagement project while upholding the legitimate existence of Baptist churches. Indeed, this forward-looking approach of America's first Baptist historian, White concluded, "helped to give the denomination, which had been virtually reborn through the Great Awakening, a sense of corporate identity."[6]

Therefore, if B. R. White concluded that Backus was a biased, but faithful Baptist historian, what do we make of the claim that Backus was a "pioneer champion of religious liberty?" As this session marks the three-hundredth anniversary of Backus's birth, it is easy to survey and show how Baptist historians have, for 300 years, concurred with this assessment. In that time, Backus is universally regarded by Baptist historians, in biographies and textbooks, for the formative role he played in the disestablishment of state religion.[7] However, his name does not appear in

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[2]White, "Why Bother with History?" 80-81.

[3]White, "Why Bother with History?" 80n6.

[4]B. R. White, "Isaac Backus and Baptist History," *Baptist History & Heritage* 5:1 (Jan 1970): 13-23. White's original address was titled, "Isaac Backus, Classic Baptist Historian," and served as the seventh and final session of the annual meeting. See "Annual Meeting Sound Recording," [SBHLA].

[5]White, "Isaac Backus and Baptist History," 14. White also notes that Backus's work "was immeasurably superior to Crosby's." White, "Isaac Backus and Baptist History," 15.

[6]White, "Isaac Backus and Baptist History," 23.

[7]Representative examples include Alvah Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times of the Rev. Isaac*

American history textbooks that are not Baptist or Christian.[8] Given that comparison, are Baptist historians, who laud him as a pioneer champion of religious liberty, biased toward one of their forerunners or accurate in their assessment, or both? Rather than survey the history of historians, my aim is to return to the source to ascertain from Backus's own writings the degree to which he was a pioneer champion of religious liberty. Given the constraints of this essay, what follows is a brief assessment of Backus in eight works.

A BRIEF ASSESSMENT OF EIGHT WORKS ON RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

A DISCOURSE SHOWING THE NATURE AND NECESSITY OF AN INTERNAL CALL TO PREACH THE EVERLASTING GOSPEL, 1754

Serving as pastor of new Congregational church since 1748, Backus and his church wrestled with their practice of infant baptism. Since his conversion came due to the influence of the Great Awakening, Backus grew in his convictions that internally churches should be pure in their membership in order to ensure that their clergy were converted and the gospel message proclaimed in faithfulness. Thus, the baptized infants as members prior to their conversion only added to the impurity. Externally, Backus maintained that only God should determine who should be called as ministers of the church, not ruling councils nor the state. His congregationalism extended toward the resistance, in Massachusetts, to pay taxes to the established church, an action for which his mother and brother paid with a prison sentence.

Backus (1859), https://archive.org/details/memoiroflifetime01hove/page/n5/mode/2up; A. H. Newman, *A History of Baptist Churches in the United States* (1894); T. B. Maston, *Isaac Backus: Pioneer of Religious Liberty* (1962); William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* (1967); Stanley J. Grenz, *Isaac Backus—Puritan and Baptist: His Place in History, His Thought, and Their Implications for Modern Baptist Theology* (1983); H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (1987); James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Baptist Theology* (2009); Nathan A. Finn, Anthony Chute, and Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story* (2015); Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins, *Baptists in America* (2015); Brandon J. O'Brien's two works, "The Edwardsean Isaac Backus: The Significance of Jonathan Edwards in Backus's Theology, History, and Defense of Religious Liberty" (PhD diss., 2013) and *Demanding Liberty: An Untold Story of American Religious Freedom* (2018); and Matthew W. Thomas, "Snares on Every Hand: Isaac Backus's Theology of Liberty" (PhD diss., 2022).

[8] A search of several of the textbooks that meet the College Board's Advanced Placement curricular requirements of AP US history reveals no mention of Isaac Backus. The related name mentioned with regularity is Roger Williams. See "Example Textbook List," https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/courses/ap-united-states-history/course-audit.

Thus, in his work, *Internal Call*, written at the end of 1753, Backus, now a Baptist, writes largely to defend his understanding of a biblical call to ministry as well as to warn against the dangers of unconverted ministers. In this passage, Backus is responding to a query and upholds that it is the role of the church alone to recognize the *internal call* of their minister. This idea of a *sola ecclesia*, if you will, is rooted, for Backus, in the Reformation and is carried forward through the likes of the Separatist John Robinson (1575-1625) and the arguments of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). As O'Brien notes, Backus's "arguments became sharper and clearer over time" as they developed into his advocacy for religious liberty, but we can see here how his understanding of the doctrine is rooted in his understanding of the church.[9] Here are Backus's thoughts as of 1754:

> This text [2 Tim 2:2] proves clearly, that Gospel-Ministers should be ordained and publicly set apart in the Church, and I have no where denied it. … They are called of God and made faithful in his work before they can be rightly received and ordained officers in his Church. … A man's being internally called of God is one thing, and his being openly received and set apart in the Church is quite another. And I defy all men under Heaven to prove from Scripture that God has any more left it in the hands of any mortal men whatsoever to say who shall be his ministers and who not than he has to say who shall be his children and who not. The argument that is raised from the Scriptures being complete is as good in one case as the other. For it is no more recorded in the Bible that this or that man is, or shall be, called to preach the Gospel. We have plain marks given us whereby we may know them that the Lord has called into the kingdom of his grace, and so we have also rules whereby we may know them that He has called to be his messengers.[10]

[9]Brandon J. O'Brien, "Isaac Backus," in *Baptist Political Theology*, ed. Thomas S. Kidd, Paul D. Miller, and Andrew T. Walker (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2023), 183. See also Thomas, "Snares on Every Hand."

[10]Isaac Backus, *A Discourse Showing the Nature and Necessity of an Internal Call to Preach the Everlasting Gospel* (Boston, 1754) in *Issac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism: Pamphlets 1754-1789*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 100; hereafter abbreviated *Pamphlets*.

A FISH CAUGHT IN HIS OWN NET, 1768

As Backus's views continued to develop, he and others formed a Baptist church in Middleborough in 1756. Pastoring in the 1750s and 1760s brought criticism also from the established church due to the fact that following the Awakening, many people were leaving those churches to join the Separates. One frequent interlocutor that appears in a few of Backus's writings in this era is Joseph Fish (1706-1781). The pastor of the Congregational church in Stonington, Connecticut, since 1732, Fish published a volume of nine sermons on what he considered the errors of the Separates, like Backus. In September 1767, Backus noted that many of his "friends desired me to answer," and in 1768, he did with the clever title *A Fish Caught in His Own Net*.[11] Therein, he debated Fish's understanding of "Standing churches" who exist due to their "union declared with the civil authority." In this line of thinking the civil authorities preserve the churches and restrain them from acting upon their own preferences without consulting other churches in order to uphold "the order and rule of the Gospel."[12] This selection shows Backus's thinking about religious liberty in 1768, and we can see why William McLoughlin said, "here Backus finally came to grips both theoretically and pragmatically with the definition of his basic principles for a doctrine of separation of church and state."[13]

[11] Isaac Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1979), 2:672. The debates with Fish would continue throughout the 1770s.

[12] Isaac Backus, *A Fish Caught in His Own Net*, (Boston, 1768), in *Pamphlets*, 187-189.

[13] William G. McLoughlin, *Pamphlets*, 169. While not the primary focus, Backus also addressed the matter of slavery in this era in *A Fish Caught in His Own Net*. Backus critiques the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts before whom the Bishop of Gloucester preached a sermon decrying dissenters like Backus as fanatics and advocating for the established church, thus limiting religious freedom. The bishop acknowledged that "the infamous traffic of slaves directly infringes both divine and human law," yet he did not call for the Society to "set all these slaves at liberty as fast as they could." Instead, Backus notes the inconsistency of those whose mission is to take the gospel to the heathen, yet "they have a great a hand in the slave trade as any." Backus, *A Fish Caught*, in *Pamphlets*, 176-178. This would appear to put Backus, as a white Baptist, further ahead than most in this era who "spoke reverentially of the Revolution's significance for universal liberty, but they avoided the Revolution's (or the gospel's) implications for slavery." Kidd and Hankins, *Baptists in America*, 99. That said, as Obbie Tyler Todd notes, despite his statements, Backus and his Baptist peers likely were "much more concerned with their own quest for liberty" than advocating for abolitionism. Obbie Tyler Todd, *Let Men Be Free: Baptist Politics in the Early United States, 1776-1835* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022), 103. Todd does note, 106, that in 1788 Backus, in a speech to the Massachusetts delegates considering the ratification of the national constitution, does express hope that one day slavery in the new nation will come to an end, but does not advocate for the inclusion of abolition in the constitution. Backus, Diary, 3:1220.

[A]s civil rulers ought to be men fearing God, and hating covetousness, and to be terrors to evil doers, and a praise to them who do well; and as ministers ought to pray for their rulers, and to teach the people to be subject to them; so there may and ought to be a sweet harmony between them; yet as there is a great difference between the nature of their work, they ought never to have such union together as was described above.

1. For, The Holy Ghost calls the orders and laws of civil states *ordinances of man, 1 Pet*. ii, 13. But all the rules and orders of divine worship are *ordinances* of God, and it *defiles the earth under its inhabitants when these laws are transgressed and ordinances changed, Isai*. xxiv, 5. …

2. The civil magistrate's work is to promote order and peace among men in their moral behavior towards each other so that every person among all denominations who *doth that which is good may have praise of the same*, and that all contrary behavior may be restrained or forcibly punished. And as all sorts of men are members of civil society and partake of the benefits of such government therefore they ought to be *subject* and pay *tribute* to rulers, *Rom. xiii*, 1-6. But the work of Gospel Ministers is to labor to *open* men's *eyes* and to *turn them from darkness unto light, and from the power of Satan unto God, Acts* xxvi, 18. …

3. Another difference between civil and ecclesiastical government is that civil states, if large, have various degrees of offices one above another who receive their authority through many hands, down from the head and that often, more according to estate or favor than of merit. But 'tis the reserve in Christ's kingdom; he forbid the first notions of this in his disciples and expressly told them that it *should not be so* among them as it was in earthly states, *Mark x*, 43; *Luke xxii*, 26. An obvious reason of this difference is that an earthly king cannot in person see to but little that is done in his kingdom and therefore must trust others to manage affairs for him in his absence; but Zion's King is present everywhere and sees to all that is done and tells every church, *I know thy works*, and he takes care that the

faithful are supported and rewarded and that the unfaithful are corrected or punished.[14]

A SEASONABLE PLEA FOR LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE, 1770

In the summer of 1770, Isaac Backus was preaching in the town of Berwick, Maine, when he encountered the experience of a couple in the Congregational church who were excommunicated in recent years following their joining a Baptist church. As the town continued to require the Baptist couple to pay taxes to fund the Congregational church, Backus wrote *A Seasonable Plea* to take up their cause.[15] This action is representative of Backus's beginning to advocate for other Baptists beyond his own congregation, a ministry of public service that will continue for the rest of his life.[16] At the start of *A Seasonable Plea*, Backus explains that, "what had the greatest weight in my mind was the consideration that many who are filling the nation with the cry of liberty, and against oppressors, are at the same time themselves violating that dearest of all rights, liberty of conscience."[17]

At issue was the concept of "liberty of conscience," about which Backus and the leaders of the Congregational church had differing definitions. The leaders of the church in Berwick stated that, "Liberty of conscience we claim ourselves and allow others, as a darling point, and therefore must not be forced to anything contrary to our consciences."[18] Thus, Backus encountered a church not opposed to religious liberty, but rather liberty as defined by the church's conscience, not the consciences of those who were dissenting based on their understanding of Scripture. To this Backus asked, "Why truly their members are forced either to believe as the church believes, or be dealt with as public offenders! … If it is only the church that is to judge, then where is their allowance of liberty to others as a darling point!"[19]

Backus continued to bolster his plea with *an appeal* to the shared cause

[14]Backus, *A Fish Caught*, in *Pamphlets*, 190-195.

[15]Backus, *Diary*, 2:764.

[16]O'Brien notes that it "is helpful to think of Backus's work in two major phases: (1) from 1754 to 1770, during which time Backus wrote almost exclusively for local ecclesiastical audiences and (2) from 1771 to 1805, during which time his work took on more public and sometimes national dimensions." Brandon J. O'Brien, "Isaac Backus," in *Baptist Political Theology*, ed. Thomas S. Kidd, Paul D. Miller, and Andrew T. Walker (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2023), 182.

[17]Isaac Backus, *A Seasonable Plea for Liberty of Conscience* (Boston, 1770), 3.

[18]Backus, *A Seasonable Plea*, 4.

[19]Backus, *A Seasonable Plea*, 5.

of Revolution. In this quotation from his work, we see Backus making his case on a theme to which he will return as he continued to advocate for Baptists in the public square.[20]

> Some would accuse us of being enemies to our country because we move in these things now. Though if regard to our country had not prevailed above our private interests, possibly the court of Great-Britain would have heard our complaints before this time. However, let our accusers turn the tables. Let them hear their oppressors exclaiming from year to year against being taxed without their own consent, and against the scheme of imposing episcopacy upon them. While the same persons impose cruelly upon their neighbors, and force large sums from them to uphold a worship which they conscientiously dissent from, and then see if they will sit still until their oppressors have got fully established in their power, before they seek deliverance from their yoke, for this is truly our case.[21]

A CIRCULAR LETTER TO THE CHURCHES OF THE WARREN BAPTIST ASSOCIATION, 1773

During the 1760s Baptist churches in New England worked together to form a more cohesive presence as an ecclesial minority, and Backus emerged as a clear leader. Working with pastor James Manning (1738-1791), Backus helped to form the College of Rhode Island where Manning would serve as president. Following the increased strength of the Philadelphia Baptist Association of churches, Manning also led in the formation of the Warren Baptist Association (1767), an advisory council for churches.[22] This new Association sought to advocate for Baptist churches and religious liberty in view of the civil authorities, but from the onset, claimed no superiority or infallibility over the churches who "profess the Scriptures to be the only rule of faith and practice in religious matters."[23]

By 1769 the Warren Baptist Association formed a Grievance Committee

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[20]For more on the ecclesiological implications of *A Seasonable Plea*, see O'Brien, "The Edwardsean Isaac Backus," 101-108.

[21]Backus, *A Seasonable Plea*, 14.

[22]Kidd and Hankins, *Baptists in America*, 42-43. See also Isaac Backus, A *History of New England* (1784; repr., Newton, MA: Backus Historical Society, 1871) 2:154-155.

[23]*The Sentiments and Plan of the Warren Association* (Germantown, 1769).

to receive accounts of persecution by Baptists and to advance their cause and the cause of religious liberty. As one of the founding members of that committee, Backus used this platform as a chief means by which he engaged establishment oppression.[24] This selection gives an example of one of the circular letters Backus sent to Baptist churches in May 1773.

> [W]hen we received accounts that several of our friends at Mendon have lately had their goods forcibly taken from them, for ministerial rates, and that three more of them at Chelmsford, [were] carried prisoners to Concord jail; so that liberty of conscience, the greatest and most important article of all liberty, is evidently not allowed, as it ought to be in this country, not even by the very men who are now making loud complaints of encroachments upon their own liberties. And as it appears to us clear that the root of all these difficulties, … is civil rulers assuming a power to make any laws to govern ecclesiastical affairs, or to use any force to support ministers; therefore, these are to desire you to consider whether it is not our duty to strike so directly at this root, as to refuse any conformity to their laws about such affairs, even so much as giving any certificates to their assessors. We are fully persuaded that if we were all united in bearing what others of our friends might, for a little while, suffer on this account, a less sum than has already been expended with lawyers and courts, on such accounts, would carry us through the trial, and, if we should be enabled to treat our oppressors with a Christian temper, would make straining upon others, under pretence of supporting religion, appear so odious that they could not get along with it. We desire you would consider of these matters, and send in your mind to the assembly of our churches.[25]

AN APPEAL TO THE PUBLIC FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, 1773

Following the responses received to Backus's circular letter and the work of the Grievance Committee, later that year the Association voted to publish a document Backus wrote as *an appeal to the public* that Baptists

[24]Backus would serve as the leader of this committee for ten years starting in 1772.

[25]Isaac Backus, "Circular Letter," May 5, 1773, in Hovey, *Memoir of Backus*, 188-190.

should not accept the exemption certificates offered to them by the state. These certificates allowed for Baptists to avoid paying taxes to support the established church, but the issue for the Warren Association remained that by accepting them they were conceding that the state had the power to grant them, and what they wanted was absolute and total freedom from this kind of state power over religion.[26] Thus, Backus's document called for the Baptists to refuse the certificates. While this would, no doubt, bring persecution, Backus believed it would make their case to the public and, thereby, have a lasting effect.[27]

To aid in this strategy, the Warren Association sent Backus and Manning, along with copies of *An Appeal*, to the 1774 Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia. Samuel and John Adams, elected by Massachusetts to represent their state, were not convinced by their argument for disestablishment, citing that establishment in Massachusetts was "slender" and that the Baptists had "no cause to complain."[28] Nonetheless, Backus persisted, and while not gaining much ground in 1774, his efforts would persevere. In this selection, Backus articulates his argument for religious liberty.

> The great importance of a general union through this country in order to the preservation of our liberties has often been pleaded for with propriety, but how can such a union be expected so long as that dearest of all rights, equal liberty of conscience, is not allowed? Yea, how can any reasonably expect that He who has the hearts of kings in his hand will turn the heart of our earthly sovereign to hear the pleas for liberty of those who will not hear the cries of their fellow subjects under their oppression? … You have lately been accused with being disorderly and rebellious by men in power who profess a great regard for order and the public good. And why don't you believe them and rest easy under their administrations? You tell us you cannot because you are taxed where you are not represented. And is it not really so with us? …

[26]Backus records, "It is absolutely a point of conscience with me; for I cannot give in the certificates they require, without implicitly acknowledging that power in man which I believe belongs only to God." Backus, *Diary*, 2:917.

[27]For further analysis of this strategy, see O'Brien, "The Edwardsean Isaac Backus," 110.

[28]Backus, *Diary* 2:916-917. Backus also recorded that John Adams said, "We might as well expect a change in the solar system, as to expect they would give up their establishment."

> Thus we have laid before the public a brief view of our sentiments concerning liberty of conscience and a little sketch of our sufferings on that account. If any can show us that we have made any mistakes either about principles or facts, we should lie open to conviction. But we hope none will violate that forecited article of faith so much as to require us to yield a *blind obedience* to them or to expect that spoiling of goods or imprisonment can move us to *betray* the cause of true liberty.[29]

GOVERNMENT AND LIBERTY DESCRIBED, 1778

After the country declared independence in 1776, Baptists, as Todd notes, "believed that the Revolution in America would give way to an actual reformation of the church, a refining of any traces of civil authority from the kingdom of God."[30] For Baptists in Massachusetts, their hope centered on a new state constitution. Yet the version that appeared in 1778 made no mention of religious liberty. In part, no change followed the standing assumption that, in New England, the church and state achieved separation with the removal of Anglican rule even though all citizens still paid tax to support established churches.

When that constitution failed to achieve ratification, Backus and the Warren Association published *Government and Liberty Described* to stir up support for the inclusion of complete freedom of religion. In this selection, Backus elevates his argument that Baptists are paying a tax without representation and makes, what McLoughlin calls, "the best piece that Backus ever wrote as a lobbyist for the Baptists."[31]

> 1. Consider what our civil liberties will be if these men can have their wills. I need not inform you that all America are in areas against being taxed where they are not represented. But is it not more certain that we are not represented in the British Parliament than it is, that our civil rulers are not our representatives in religious affairs. Yet ministers have long prevailed with them to impose religious taxes entirely out of their jurisdiction. And they have now been defied to preserve

[29]Isaac Backus, *An Appeal to the Public* (Boston, 1773), in *Pamphlets*, 338-339, 342.
[30]Todd, *Let Men Be Free*, 27.
[31]McLoughlin, *Pamphlets*, 346-347.

> order in the state if they should drop that practice. …
> 2. How can liberty of conscience be rightly enjoyed till this inquiry is removed? … They often declare that they allow us liberty of conscience and also complain of injury if we recite the former and latter acts of their part to prove the contrary. Just so [they say], "Should a general tax be laid upon the country and thereby a sum be raised sufficient for that purpose, I believe such a tax would not amount to more than four pence in one hundred pounds, and this would be no mighty hardship upon the country. …" [T]here lies the difficulty. It is not the pence but the power that alarms us. And since the legislature of this State passed an act no longer ago than last September to continue a tax of four pence a year upon the Baptists in every parish where they live as an acknowledgment of the power that they have long assumed over us in religious affairs … how can we be blamed for refusing to pay that acknowledgment; especially when it is considered that it is evident that God never allowed any civil state upon earth to impose religious taxes?[32]

POLICY AS WELL AS HONESTY, 1779

Backus's *Government and Liberty Described* instigated a high-profile debate via the exchange of newspaper responses that served to advance the cause of the Baptists and keep the liberty of conscience a topic of conversation.[33] When new delegates were elected to write another version of the Massachusetts constitution in 1779, Backus, acting on behalf of Baptists and in an effort to influence the delegates, published another tract challenging religious taxation and reasserting many of his arguments from his newspaper articles.[34] In this selection from *Policy As Well As Honesty Forbids the Use of Secular Force in Religious Affairs*, Backus displayed both his rhetorical skills.

> As no man can have a right to judge for others in soul affairs, so they never could convey such a right to their representatives. Therefore all the taxes to support religious

[32]Isaac Backus, *Government and Liberty Described* (Boston, 1778), in *Pamphlets*, 357-359.
[33]McLoughlin, *Pamphlets*, 368.
[34]Backus, *Diary*, 2:1025.

> worship and judgments in such cases that have been among us were a taxing of us where we were not represented and imposing judges upon us who were interested against us. … Although the comfortable support of religious ministers is most expressly required both in the Old and New Testaments, yet the use of force to collect it, and against those who have testified against that practice, has produced such effects in all ages as none have been willing to own. But the Judge cannot be deceived by their deceitful coverings and tells us all what will become of those who allow of such deeds against the plain light to the contrary.[35]

> Rulers, ministers, and people have now a fair opportunity given to them to turn from and quit themselves of those evils, and I cannot but hope they will improve it. … Therefore we have joined as heartily in the general defense of our country as any denomination therein, and I have a better opinion of my countrymen than to think the majority of them will now agree to deny us liberty of conscience.[36]

A DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS, 1779

A fellow Baptist pastor and a friend of Backus, Noah Alden, served as one of the delegates to the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention in 1779. Prior to his joining the convention, he wrote to ask Backus for a "Bill of Rights" that outline the "natural civil and religious rights of the people."[37] Backus used the 1776 Bill of Rights included in the Virginia constitution as a foundation but amended it to fit the New England circumstances and context.[38] In the short term, Backus's optimistic efforts as an agent of the Baptists advocating since 1778 for the inclusion of religious liberty and, now also, a Bill of Rights failed. The 1780 Massachusetts constitution included neither and, what is more, used Backus's efforts dating back to his 1774 visit with the Adamses in Philadelphia to malign him, question the truthfulness of his work, and accuse Baptists of disloyalty to the Patriot cause.[39] In the long term, Backus's labors proved influential and

[35]See Matthew 23:29-33 and Luke 11:46-52.

[36]Isaac Backus, *Policy as Well as Honesty* (Boston, 1779), in *Pamphlets*, 381-383.

[37]Noah Alden to Isaac Backus, August 8, 1779, in *Pamphlets*, 487.

[38]Backus, *Diary* 3:1605.

[39]O'Brien, *Demanding Liberty*, 148-149; Backus, *Diary* 3:1611-1612.

led to disestablishment in Massachusetts. This selection shows Backus's mature thought on religious liberty.

> 1. All men are born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent and unalienable rights, among high are the enjoying and defending life and liberty, acquiring, possessing, and protecting property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.
> 2. As God is the only worthy object of all religious worship, and nothing can be true religion but a voluntary obedience until his revealed will, of which each rational soul has an equal right to judge for itself, every person has an unalienable right to act in all religious affairs according to the full persuasion of his own mind, where others are not injured thereby. And civil rulers … that their power ought to be extorted to protect all persons and societies, within their jurisdiction from being injured or interrupted in the free enjoyment of this right, under any pretense whatsoever.[40]

Following the adoption of the state constitution in Massachusetts, Backus continued to serve the Warren Baptist Association to take up the defense of Baptists in hopes of seeing disestablishment in his lifetime. Meanwhile, the nation as a whole considered a new constitution. As Massachusetts elected delegates to consider whether their state should ratify this constitution, Backus agreed to serve and used his influence to support ratification. For Backus, again, saw a window of hope for religious liberty. Indeed, when given the opportunity to speak to his delegate peers in Massachusetts, he said he saw the constitution as a door "now opened, for the establishment of righteous government, and for the securing of equal liberty, as never was before opened to any people upon earth."[41] Following the full ratification by all the states in 1791, the United States Constitution included a Bill of Rights with a first amendment that established the free exercise of religion at the national level.

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[40]Isaac Backus, *A Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants of the State of Massachusetts-Bay, in New-England* (n.p., 1779), in *Pamphlets*, 487-488.

[41]Backus, *Diary* 3:1220.

A PIONEER CHAMPION?

Just as B. R. White concluded that Backus's *History of New England* served to galvanize a denomination seeking its freedom from state religion, this brief assessment of eight of his works on religious liberty reveals Backus's influence on more than just laying a foundation for state and national debate. In the decades following Backus's death, both Connecticut and his own Massachusetts would disestablish their state churches joining every other state in the nation. In his writings, letters, and his advocacy in meetings on behalf of the Warren Association, he, indeed, was a pioneer of religious liberty. But, as a pastor and one who represented pastors, it is right to stress that Backus was "a" pioneer, one among several leaders, and one on behalf of many churches.

As his efforts contributed to, first, the ratification of the Constitution, and then to the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights, it is right to see Backus also as a champion of religious liberty. While not recognized today in standard U. S. history textbooks, his influence on the people and events mentioned in those textbooks as they recount the new nation's commitment to religious freedom is clear. Given Backus was a Baptist pastor who achieved this influence, is it biased for Baptist historians to laud him as a pioneer champion of religious liberty when most historians fail to mention him? Perhaps it is, but as B. R. White instructed, the evidence of such bias does not mean it is false. Indeed, this kind of fair, yet "passionate history" (to use White's description) may yet still serve to promote the value of Backus to students of history regardless of whether they know (or care) that he was a Baptist. Even more, recognizing Backus as a person worth retrieving from history could also serve to perpetuate the Backus ideals, whether or not Backus is mentioned by name, so that this nation might persist and celebrate true freedom of religion for its citizens for centuries to come.

A GRATEFUL PEOPLE

When one travels to Middleborough, Massachusetts, today, it is easy to imagine what it looked like 300 years ago. While nearby are several major New England metro areas, Middleborough is not exactly on the way to any of them and maintains the rural roadways and markers that Backus would still find familiar. Thus, in recent months when traveling in search of Backus's grave with three vans full of graduate students, just in case we could not find it, I held on to alternative plans for lecturing in

any field "near where Backus lived and died" instead of the grave itself. While Backus's grave is hard to miss when you are in the right place, it is not documented well in New England guidebooks.

On the western edge of the Titicut Parish Cemetery, next to the North Congregationalist Church, where Backus pastored before he became a Baptist, Backus's grave sits near the parking lot. The grave is designed as a stone pulpit, with a large open Bible on top. On the side, a plaque, now green with age memorializes Backus, as we have discussed, as "a pioneer champion of religious liberty, and the earliest Baptist historian in America." Further, it notes that the monument was "erected by a grateful people." Who were these grateful people? While Backus's first grave marker was placed at his death, nearly 70 years later, when the Old Colony Baptist Association had their anniversary meeting in Middleborough, they concluded that the small, original marker was not a fitting memorial.[42] They returned almost twenty years after their meeting, and almost a century after Backus's passing, to dedicate the large pulpit marker that remains today to express their gratitude for Backus's legacy.[43] Regardless of whether or not Backus's name appears in standard U.S. history textbooks today, the fact that a century after his death, Baptists saw fit to reset his grave as an expression of gratitude for his life and ministry, conveys something significant about his lasting value.

We did find Backus's grave on that trip with the graduate students. As I think of that group gathered around to listen to the stories of Backus and the struggle for religious liberty, it occurs to me that many heard then of Backus, a forefather to whom they were indebted, for the first time. Yet, I think that might be a picture of what Backus and his Baptist peers intended for this country—the idea that for centuries to come, new generations would grow up with widespread religious freedom to the degree that they could not imagine the world in any other way. Those eighteenth-century forerunners would, no doubt, be delighted to know that these students lived with religious freedom much like a young fish lives in an ocean of water—it had not occurred to them to think before of what life would be like without it, and much less, what it cost to secure it. The freedom of worship citizens in this country enjoy—a freedom of religion that comes without having to pay taxes toward an established church or fear

[42]The original marker was removed to the Baptist church, now First Baptist North Middleborough.

[43]Thomas Weston, *History of the Town of Middleboro, Massachusetts* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 405.

of imprisonment, is a remarkable freedom. Therefore, during this year that marks the three-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Isaac Backus, may studies like this propel us to be the kind of "passionate historians" that B. R. White identified so that future generations might continue to learn of and appreciate Backus and his pioneering spirit, so that they, too, will mark themselves also as "a grateful people," equipped to do their part to ensure that religious liberty remains a remarkable freedom for future generations and for the glory of God.

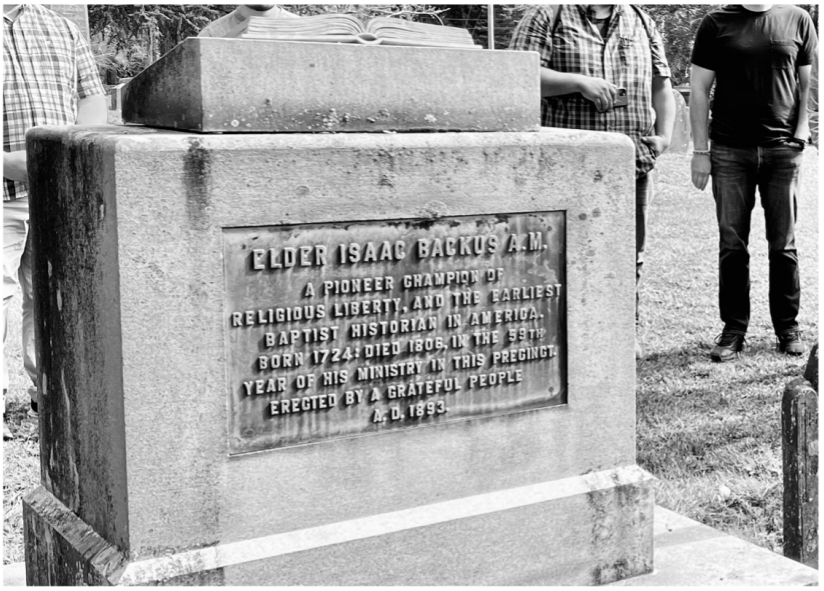

Photo: Isaac Backus grave, Titicut Parish Cemetery, Middleborough, Massachusetts © Jason G. Duesing (2023)

REVERING THE TRADITION OF AMERICA'S "TWO SPIRITS"

John D. Wilsey*

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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[1]Alexis 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

[2]Aaron 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.

[3]Jason 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

[4]Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.ii.9.467

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

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

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

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

[9]Tocqueville, *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,

[10]Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.ii.9.473.
[11]Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II.ii.2.878.
[12]Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I.ii.9.475.
[13]Tocqueville, *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

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

[15]Tocqueville, *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.

[16]Tocqueville, *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]

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[17]Abraham 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.

[18]Translations of Scripture are from the NASB.

[19]Lincoln, "Speech at Chicago," 147.

[20]Abraham 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

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of America, 2009), 96.

[21]Lincoln, "Speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act," 97.

[22]Lincoln, "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

[23]Zitner, "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]

[24]Vermont 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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[1]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).

[2]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.[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

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8.4 (Winter 2004): 85.

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

[4]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*.

[5]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: Academie, 1990).

[6]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.

[7]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.[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

[8]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.

[9]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.

[10]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.

[11]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.[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.

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[12]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.

[13]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.

[14]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).[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

[15]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).

[16]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).

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

[18]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.[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

[19]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.[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

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

[22]Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 78-79.
[23]Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 80.
[24]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."[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

[25]Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 59.
[26]Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 59.
[27]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.[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

[28]Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 175-76.
[29]Henry, *Gods of This Age or the God of the Ages?*, 189.
[30]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.[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

[31]Henry, *Gods of This Age or the God of the Ages?*, 181.
[32]Henry, *Gods of This Age or the God of the Ages?*, 22.
[33]Henry, *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

[34]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).

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

[36]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."[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.

[37]Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 22.

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

[39]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.

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

[41]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.[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

[42]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).

[43]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.

[44]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.[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.

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

[2]Robert 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

[3]Jonathan 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).

[5] The 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

[6]Thomas 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,

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

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

[9]Isaac 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 nationalists[11] and Catholic integralists[12] 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

[10]Isaac 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/).

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

[12]Patrick 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.

[13]Ian 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).

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

[15]Daniel 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).

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM:
Why and How in Today's World

James Leo Garrett Jr.*

It is very probable that some persons may think inwardly and perhaps contend overtly, especially after exposure to the key documents looking to the advocacy of religious freedom written during the centuries from the fifteenth through the seventeenth, that the validity and relevance of the classic arguments for religious freedom belong to the age in which they were formulated, but not necessarily to the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Perhaps such persons would express themselves as follows: The classic arguments for religious liberty indeed were valid during earlier epochs of human history. They were desperately needed to bring relief from centuries of oppression—the Crusades, the Inquisition, the wars of religion, recurring grievous bodily persecution—and were indispensable to the attainment of that human freedom so basic to the modern democratic societies. By reading the English Reformation classic, Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and/or the Mennonite classic, van Bragh't's *Martyrs' Mirror*, one can see what great changes came with the securing of toleration and ultimately of genuine freedom. But ours is a very different age. We live in a complex technological society whose intricate societal problems call for the best efforts of government and of religion. Governments are no longer merely to repress evildoers and maintain civil order; they have assumed a plethora of functions in education, health, economic management, and social welfare—what we call the "welfare state." Moreover, the Christian churches and the Jewish synagogues have assumed a more active role in contributing to human welfare and in seeking to influence the political decisions that so largely shape the society. On a worldwide scale, atheism, secularism, humanism, and godlessness have spread in unparalleled fashion, partly under the sway of militant advocates, and now claim the

*This article is the third of three Day-Higginbotham Lectures and was delivered at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary on February 12, 1976. It then appeared in *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 18 (1976), 9–24.

loyalty of multiplied millions. Ours is a radically different age from that of our spiritual and political predecessors, and it calls for radically different answers. Most all the classical advocates of religious toleration and freedom believed in one God and the final accountability of all men to him. Today many advocate freedom of religion so as to be able to practice irreligion. The very religious and moral foundations of society, especially in Western Europe and North America, seem to be crumbling under the impact of rapid human and social change. Does not religious freedom permit, or even encourage, the loosening of the breakdown of these foundations? Is not the cooperation of state and church in meeting human needs much more imperative than the old case for "soul freedom"? Is there really a case for religious freedom today? So goes the argument.

Such an argument deserves very careful attention. The very fact that it exists points to the need for reexamining familiar postures in succeeding generations. The argument challenges the abiding validity of freedom of religion vis-à-vis the civil state and seeks to attach such freedom to the needs of a particular historical age. Any serious response to the argument must be in some sense a guest for an apologetic for religious freedom in 1976.

I

Why religious freedom in today's world? Is it valid in certain nations but not in others? Was it formerly much needed to combat authoritarianism but now must be modified or displaced in the face of libertarianism? Is there truly a present-day case for religious freedom? If so, what specific considerations constitute the case?

First, at least for Christians, Jesus and the early Christians practiced religious freedom. They did not persecute others, whether Jew or Gentile, on account of their religion. Jesus' most severe strictures against the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 23) were verbal but not violent, prophetic but not coercive. Repeatedly Jesus taught his disciples to expect to be persecuted: in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:10–12), in the sending out of the Twelve (Matt 10:17–23), in connection with the woes against the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 23:29–36), and in the discourse on the Mount of Olives (Mark 13:9–13). Recent advocates of the theory that Jesus was a Zealot[1] or would be a violent revolutionary in today's world have sought to make Jesus a

[1]Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), who rejected the view that Jesus himself was a Zealot, traced the modern advocacy of the view (11) to R. Eisler, *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist* (London: Methuen & Co., 1931).

man of the sword, citing especially the text wherein Jesus enjoined his disciples to "buy" a "sword," the disciples reported that they had "two swords," and Jesus declared, "It is enough" (Luke 22:35–38). But his word to the impetuous and violent Peter, "Put your sword back into place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matt 26:52, RSV), seems clearly and unambiguously to represent the teaching of Jesus. Jesus and the apostles sought to persuade men, not coerce them. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matt 23:37, RSV). Jesus and the early Christians obeyed the Roman government on civil matters. Jesus' "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Mark 12:17a) was followed by Rom 13:1–7 and 1 Pet 2:13–17. They refused, however, to give to the Jewish hierarchy or the Roman state the allegiance that belongs only to God. "Render to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17b). "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). The Apocalypse described a "beast" that blasphemes God, makes war on "the saints," and receives the worship of all except the Christians (Rev 13:5–8). The issue had been joined: Caesar or Christ! Not until the fourth century AD or later did the Christians sanction the use of civil power to enforce religious uniformity.

Second, religious freedom is consistent with great motifs of the Bible, especially the New Testament. A. F. Carrillo de Albornoz was surely correct when he asserted that religious liberty "*is not a revealed truth*"[2] that is, "not explicitly revealed as an integral part of the biblical revelation,"[3] but rather is "'an *implication* of the Christian faith.'"[4] We do well to recognize the differences between ancient biblical and modern settings. Indeed,

> ... the setting of the Old Testament is a theocratic kingdom forged by an ex-nomad people and falling to regnant imperial powers, first in exile and later in restoration. Likewise, [most of] the writers of the New Testament ... belonged to that company of early Christians who left the matrix of Judaism and lived their lives under the might and coercions

[2]A. F. Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty* (New York: Association Press, 1963), 56.

[3]James Leo Garrett, Jr., "The Biblical Basis of Religious Liberty," *The Truth That Makes Men Free: Official Report of the Eleventh Congress, Baptist World Alliance, Miami Beach, Florida, U.S.A., June 25-30, 1965*, ed. Josef Nordenhaug (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), 282.

[4]First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Amsterdam, 1948, "Declaration on Religious Liberty," quoted by Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty*, 56.

of the Roman Empire.[5]

To state the matter negatively in the words of Niels H. Søe, "*The basis of religious liberty* is the very fact that Christ did not come in heavenly splendor and worldly majesty to subjugate any possible resistance and force all and everybody to subjection."[6] More positively, religious freedom is consistent with the biblical concepts of man's answerability to God; of faith as persuasion; of the suffering of Jesus as the Messiah; of the church as a gathered, witnessing, servant community; of the limits to the competence of the state; and of the lordship of Christ and the sovereignty of God.

Third, present-day persecution for the sake of religion, as well as persecution and wars of religion during past centuries, calls for the attainment, the preservation, and the practice of religious freedom. Despite the great constitutional guarantees and widespread advocacy of religious freedom, the twentieth century has been and is an age of persecution. The German Church Struggle and the Jewish Holocaust under Hitler's Third Reich—now the subject of such intensive scholarly study[7]—serve as continuing reminders of man's inhumanity to man and the barbarous constrictions and the ghastly genocide of the totalitarian state. In the People's Republic of China more than a quarter century of total suppression has seemingly greatly reduced the number of Christians. In the Soviet Union both Jews and Christians, whether Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Evangelical Christian-Baptist, Adventist, or otherwise, continue to live under severe restrictions upon the exercise of their faith as well as under the indoctrination of state-sponsored atheism. The limitations on the emigration of Soviet Jews, especially to Israel, are well known and evoke widespread popular concern and political action. The restrictions upon and the imprisonments of leaders such as Georgi Vins[8] among the *Initsiativniki*, the resistant and unregistered group of Evangelical Christians and Baptists that separated from the All-Union Council fifteen years ago, are less well known in the West and evoke only modest church sympathy and even less political action, but constitute nevertheless a major chapter in

[5]Garrett, "The Biblical Basis of Religious Liberty," 282.

[6]Niels H. Søe, "The Theological Basis of Religious Liberty," *The Ecumenical Review*, 11 (January 1958): 40.

[7]See, for example, Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke, eds., *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974).

[8]See Georgi Vins, *Testament from Prison*, trans. Jane Ellis and ed. Michael Bourdeaux (Elgin, Ill.: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1975)

the contemporary denial of religious freedom. The Christians who appear as characters in the novels of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Solzhenitsyn's own "Lenten Letter to Patriarch Pimen" (March 1972) form additional evidence of the plight of Christians in the Soviet Union. One need not espouse the view of Pastor Richard Wurmbrand that only in underground churches are true Christians to be found. Nor must one accept the opposite implication of the policy of détente between the USA and the USSR, namely, that religious persecution is of minimal importance. Ernest A. Payne's sympathetic, yet critical, posture in *Out of Great Tribulation: Baptists in the U.S.S.R.*[9] seems to be somewhat more adequate. In Eastern Europe, restrictions upon religious freedom persist in varying degrees, ranging from total suppression in Albania and very severe restrictions in Bulgaria and East Germany to the constitutionally guaranteed and practiced freedom of worship in Yugoslavia. Religious restraints continue in Cuba. In Uganda, the regime of President Amin discriminates against Christians and other non-Muslims, and in Zaire the regime of President Mobotu has virtually outlawed all religious instruction. In certain African nations, especially Malawi, Jehovah's Witnesses are facing expulsion for nonconformity to the new national governments. Burma and India have curtailed the entry of Christian missionaries or certain types of missionaries. In Afghanistan, the burning of a Protestant church building goes unchallenged. Indeed, religious freedom, so lacking for many today, is needed, and those who deny its need should make certain they have "walked in the moccasins" of the persecuted.

Fourth, the pluralistic nations or societies that are emerging demand the recognition and practice of religious freedom—not only freedom of worship but also of witness, education, ministry, publication, and conversion—without civil penalties. Such freedom is essential if pluralistic societies are to have either civic stability or religious peace. George Huntston Williams insisted a decade ago that only one genuine pluralistic society existed, namely, the United States of America.[10] Admittedly, the American "melting pot" is more universal in its components. Yet the pluralistic society, especially the existence of several diverse religious communities within one political entity, is increasingly to be found. Moreover, the tragic conflicts in Northern Ireland and Lebanon, which are indeed much more than religious

[9]Ernest A. Payne, *Out of Great Tribulation* (London: Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1974).

[10]Quoted in James Leo Garrett Jr., "The 'Free Exercise' Clause of the First Amendment: Retrospect and Prospect," *Journal of Church and State* 17 (Autumn 1975): 398.

struggles but from which the religious factor cannot truly be eliminated, point to the need for full religious freedom rather than militant religious polemics or negotiated constitutional settlements between major religions.

Fifth, since majority religions tend to repress or to discriminate against minority religions within a given society or at least to seek and to take special political advantages for themselves, constitutional guarantees and judicial protection of freedom of religion are often necessary to secure religious freedom for the adherents of minority religions. The advantages of and sometimes the repressions by state churches, or established churches, are familiar to the student of church history or of Western civilization. Less familiar is the fact that it was not Protestants, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, or Jews, but rather the Jehovah's Witnesses whose frequent cases before the United States Supreme Court during the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s—from *Lovell v. Griffin* (1938)[11] to *Fowler v. Rhode Island* (1955)[12]—led to the delineation by the Court of the meaning of the "free exercise" clause of the First Amendment. The latest issue seems to be between religious groups such as the Unification Church, the Children of God, and Krishna Consciousness and the parents of young people who have become members of such groups; the parents are alleging that the youths have been "brainwashed" and need to be "deprogrammed," and the young members are claiming the "free exercise" of religion. Many have said that Baptists have never persecuted others. But does this mean that Baptists, where a major segment of the population, have not sought advantages for themselves? What of the deacon in the rural church who asks the county commissioner to pave the church's parking area, or the pastor who vigorously defends his housing allowances on the federal income tax, or the administrator who is sure that religious freedom can be maintained even though his Baptist institution accepts government grants or subsidies? However, committed theoretically any religious group may be to universal religious liberty, it ought never to allow itself to be deceived about its own capacity to seek special privilege or to practice discrimination.

Sixth, present-day international travel, commerce, immigration, and communication are such to make religious freedom highly desirable and genuinely beneficial. As in no previous century and because of the vast new means of rapid transportation and extensive communication, human beings are able to leave their cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and national settings

[11] 303 U.S. 444.
[12] 345 U.S. 67.

by means of travel and thereby to become exposed to new and different settings. The same new conditions in transportation and communication make possible more extensive contacts in international trade and open the door, where laws permit, to considerable immigration. Even without geographic movement television, radio, and the press make possible the coming of new ideas in cross-cultural as well as intra-cultural communication. Through such media religious communication has been extended in unparalleled fashion. To be able to engage in such geographical movement and to utilize such media of communication but to be bound by laws that prohibit a change of religious persuasion or any profession and practice of religion places contemporary man in a difficult and unfortunate situation. Twentieth-century technology has made anachronistic as well as unjust the legal and governmental constrictions upon religion.

Seventh, the Christian world mission, divested of attachments to colonialism and committed to a six-continent base and field perspective, would be enhanced by the possibility of worldwide religious freedom. Perhaps it is a paradox that Christianity has both produced great religious persecution and has provided, along with Judaism, the primary stimulus to religious freedom. Where would one find an Islamic or a Buddhist movement actively working for universal religious freedom? Ever since the resistance of the Jewish youths, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, to Babylonian emperor worship in the sixth century BC (Dan 3), the Judaeo- Christian heritage has known the possibility of conscientious religious objection to the mandates of the civil state. Now in the latter part of the twentieth century AD, during what some are calling the "post-Constantinian age," conscientious religious dissent and non-dependence on government for the support of religion are being experienced. Christianity, because it both claims and works toward a universal mission and fosters universal religious freedom, is generally able to thrive where religious freedom exists. To say this is, of course, not to deny that also the "blood of Christians" in martyrdom has been the "seed" of the church.[13]

Eighth and finally, the practice of universal religious liberty helps to make more evident to Christians that Christianity is truly dependent upon the gospel, the Bible, and the power, gifts, and leadership of the Holy Spirit. Christians need not only to read that Jesus' "kingship is not of this world" (John 18:36) but also to resist the nationalization, the politicization, and the acculturation of the Christian faith, no matter what

[13]Tertullian, *Apology*, ch. 50 (ANF, 3:55).

its form. The weapons of the Christian warfare are not "worldly" (2 Cor 10:4). The church cannot rightly expect unbelievers to be the bearers of its mission. It is truly dependent upon its suffering yet triumphant Lord, and it may indeed have to suffer with him if it is to share his triumph.

These eight historical and contemporary considerations hopefully constitute a case that would tend to convince serious and concerned Christians today, and indeed others, that the espousal and practice of universal religious freedom constitute a much needed and very important goal.

As to the realization of such a goal, we should recognize that in North America, in northern and southern Europe (despite the lingering of legally established "state" churches and what some Germans now differentiate as *Volkskirchen*, or people's churches), in Australasia, in most nations of Latin America (especially since Vatican Council II), in several nations of East Asia (Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore),[14] and in many nations of sub-Sahara Africa there now exists a considerable degree of religious freedom with respect to the national governments. Such nations are by no means free from problems in the implementation of religious freedom. On the other hand, the Soviet Union, the eastern European nations, Cuba, the Peoples' Republic of China, certain Muslim nations of Africa and the Middle East, and Asian nations such as Nepal and Tibet restrict rather severely the free exercise of religion, though usually they grant freedom and privilege to state-sponsored atheism or to the predominant or traditional religion.

II

In turning from the why of religious freedom to the how of religious freedom in today's world, from apologetic to implementation, it is necessary concerning religious freedom to differentiate, as in the case of world food supplies, between the "have" and the "have not" nations or peoples.

Respecting the exercise of religion in the "have not" nations, it is imperative to give ample stress to the role and responsibility of the citizens of the "have" nations. First, those who enjoy the blessings of religious freedom have an obligation to advocate repeatedly and responsibly for religious freedom for all the citizens of the "have not" nations.

Such advocacy can be undertaken through political channels. The

[14]On the contrary, religious freedom, at least in respect to Christian social action, has been recently curtailed in South Korea, and in the Philippines martial law and the tensions with Mindanao Muslims have led to church-state tensions.

United Nations, despite its limitations, is still a forum that shapes world opinion. Through international diplomacy, some efforts can be made in behalf of those who are overtly persecuted for religious beliefs and practices. National policies of international trade and travel can be made to reflect the concern of its citizens for the human rights of citizens of other nations. But political action in behalf of repressed, discriminated against, and even tortured people will not come automatically; it likely will depend on a groundswell of concerted citizen action.

The cause of the persecuted also can and ought to be championed by the religious bodies, especially the Christian churches. The World Council of Churches has been active in the cause of religious freedom, in respect both to study and to action for the oppressed, but the membership of Russian Orthodoxy in the WCC has served to limit that action in the socialist nations. The national councils of churches in various lands can, should, and sometimes do act in the cause of the oppressed. World confessional families, such as the Baptist World Alliance, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the like, have special responsibility for religious liberty, since most of these international bodies have member churches in nations wherein religious freedom is seriously constricted. The denominational bodies within nations enjoying religious freedom have a similar opportunity and duty. Their strengths ought to be placed in the service of those who are weak. The Southern Baptist Convention, it would seem, has yet to make any major effort or any real sacrifice in behalf of oppressed peoples, particularly the unregistered churches in the USSR. The recent appeal of Albert Boiter of Radio Liberty to Southern Baptists has seemingly been ignored.[15] Grassroots efforts by Christians who form *ad hoc* groups can be surprisingly effective. Christians in Great Britain, a land often described in terms of its spiritual decline, have been more active in behalf of Georgi Vins and other dissidents than have Christians in the USA.[16] Jesus' words were not addressed to the rich and favored—to those with two boats, three bathrooms, and four cars—when he said, "I was in prison and you visited me" and "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matt 25:36c, 35c).

The mass media have a role to play in securing greater religious freedom for all men. Television documentaries, radio and television coverage of

[15]John Rutledge, "West Ignores Plight of Russian Baptists," *Baptist Standard* 87 (17 September 1975): 12–13.

[16]The Durham Committee, formed in 1971, petitioned the Soviet Embassy in London in 1974.

the events of persecution, investigative newspaper reporting and in-depth analysis, magazine and journal articles, and pertinent books can help to awaken interest in and action for those who are denied freedom of religion. Second, the citizens of the "have not" nations should be encouraged to utilize whatever limited religious freedom they do have, and the citizens of the "have" nations should be active in assisting them. In some instances constitutional freedom of worship within church buildings does exist, and usually believers gather regularly in such places, though police actions sometimes inhibit even such worship. The printing and distribution of vernacular Bibles can also assist the free exercise of Christianity in "have not" nations. It is a moot question whether the activities of Bible smugglers are truly more effective than the limited distribution through legal channels. Among the most effective means of propagating religious beliefs among those in the "have not" nations seems to be vernacular broadcasts on powerful international radio stations located in the "have" nations. Reports of assistance in resettling refugees and immigrants in the "have" nations can encourage those still restricted in the "have not" nations. In Muslim lands, medical missions, disaster relief, and other humanitarian projects can be both legal and productive of good will for the faith of those who serve.

What now can be said about implementing religious freedom in the "have" nations, especially the USA? Six areas of reply seem pertinent. First, the broad base of support for religious freedom needs to be strengthened. Politically, that support can be identified on three levels: constitutional, legislative and executive, and judicial. Guarantees of religious freedom for all citizens may now be found in the constitutions or primary documents of many nations and political subdivisions. The First Amendment to the US Constitution has served as the model or guide for other similar provisions. A very few would still amend the US Constitution to specify the establishment of Christianity, and others would amend it so as to specify the legality of prayer in public schools. But there seem to be no persuasive reasons for tampering with the First Amendment. Legislative and executive powers sometimes pose the most serious threat to genuine religious freedom, particularly on the provincial or local level. The judiciary, on the contrary, usually affords protection against the infringements of freedom of religion. Such has clearly been true in the USA, wherein the Supreme Court has consistently acted, particularly during the middle third of the twentieth century, to protect "the free exercise" of religion

by its minorities.[17]

Broad-based church support of religious freedom is also important. Baptists have historically been in the vanguard of those contending for and supporting universal religious freedom. Baptists still make important contributions to the cause. Let us not underestimate what Baptists have gained under religious freedom. Would there be a theological seminary with 2,800 students in a nation in which there were no enforceable guarantees of religious freedom? But is it not possible to acknowledge that where and when Baptists have become a majority or near majority denomination—when they have become numerous, prosperous, but not necessarily so wise—they have entered into church-state entanglements or have almost unwittingly married culture-religion so as to dampen their testimony to religious freedom? Seventh-Day Adventists have been and are strong and consistent advocates of religious freedom for all. Most of the Protestant bodies in the USA have formally subscribed to religious freedom. Since Vatican Council II, the Roman Catholic commitment to religious liberty, though not to church-state separation, has become official and genuine, with important consequences for Latin America. Eastern Orthodoxy in the USA and in western Europe has tended to learn the value and worth of religious freedom from the consequences of the Bolshevik Revolution. Unitarians and Jews have generally been firm supporters of religious freedom, providing some of its leading recent spokesmen.

Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others operate under the American guarantee of "free exercise" of religion; their own views thereupon are less clear. Humanists and secularists generally espouse freedom of (or from) religion, and the libertarian movement ordinarily embraces it or at least tolerates it. Certain atheists strongly contend for religious freedom, while their contentions seem to imply the establishment of secularism in public schools.

Second, the corollary of religious freedom, the institutional separation of church and state, needs to be implemented, wherever possible. We do well to learn from the legacy of William of Ockham, Marsilius of Padua, Petr Chelčický, the Anabaptists, especially Roger Williams, and Thomas Jefferson. Established churches still survive in western Europe, though their privileges have in most cases been reduced. The persistence of such establishments parallels the decline in church attendance and participation in the same nations. The free churches of Britain knew in the late nineteenth

[17]Garrett, "The 'Free Exercise' Clause of the First Amendment," 394–97.

and early twentieth centuries exactly why they favored the disestablishment of the Church of England, and they said so in no uncertain terms. It now seems strange to hear from leaders of the British Baptists that they now oppose disestablishment lest it accelerate the process of secularization. Legal provisions for the separation of church and state in socialist nations are often seriously eroded by the refusal of government officials to allow the churches to function. Consequently, separation means in practice suppression of church life. In the United States the constitutional prohibition of an "establishment of religion" has been somewhat eroded by legislation and executive actions that tend toward plural establishment. Parochiaid, the military chaplaincy, and human welfare are particularly acute areas. Despite the grave apprehensions of Protestants during the presidential candidacy of John F. Kennedy (1960) as to the actions of a Roman Catholic president, President Kennedy's record on church-state separation was much more consistent than the subsequent records of Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon. To maintain the delicate balance between the two religion clauses of the First Amendment—"no ... establishment"[18] and "free exercise"—separation is necessary.

Third, in a pluralistic society such as the USA, new consensuses need to be formed in the sociopolitical order, to which consensuses religions and religious bodies may contribute, on the basis of which specific problems and issues can be dealt with and hopefully solved and resolved. The late Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray reminded Americans of the importance of the political consensus.[19] Deists and Protestant Christians, it should be remembered, formed the political consensus that brought forth the American Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution. All who are alarmed about the increase of crime and of disrespect of law ought to recognize the fact that a moral consensus is essential to the enactment and the enforcement of criminal law. After all, why should a given act be reckoned as a crime against the state? Why should the citizenry so regard it? The abortion issue points clearly to the need for a moral consensus. Roman Catholics and libertarians set forth their contradictory cases. The outcome is likely not to be that either case will completely prevail. Let the religious bodies make their contribution to the forming of a consensus according to which such an issue can be politically and legally resolved.

[18]See James Leo Garrett Jr., "The 'No ... Establishment' Clause of the First Amendment: Retrospect and Prospect," *Journal of Church and State* 17 (Winter 1975): 5–13.

[19]John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960), esp. chs. 3, 4.

The teaching and practice concerning abortion within any denomination or religious community is, it should be clearly noted, an entirely different issue. If the word of the present author regarding the need for moral consensus in the American political order seems to be sobering, one should examine the much more critical hypothesis of Robert Nisbet in his recent volume, *The Twilight of Authority*:

> I believe the single most remarkable fact at the present-time in the West is neither technological nor economic, but political: the waning of the historic political community, the widening sense of the obsolescence of politics as a civilized pursuit, even as a habit of mind. By political community I mean more than the legal state. I have in mind the whole fabric of rights, liberties, participations, and protections that has been, even above industrialism, ... the dominant element of modernity in the West.[20]

Fourth, if religious freedom for all is to be maintained, every safeguard must be utilized to insure that the cooperation of churches and religious bodies with governments does not produce an undue interlocking of the religious and the civil or a governmental subsidization of religion, whether in the singular or the plural. In education, the care of the sick and of the aged, aid to the poor, disaster relief, resettlement of refugees, and many other areas both government and organized religion are presently involved. Churches will need to continue to reassess their diaconal responsibilities and priorities. Some forms of cooperation, such as the Central Intelligence Agency's utilization of foreign missionaries, are inherently illegitimate and should be terminated. Moreover, Christians need clearly to differentiate the hand of Caesar, even when covered with the velvet glove of Washington bureaucracy, and the hand of Christ extended by those who believe in, love, and serve him.

Fifth, the free exercise of religion in the present-day United States may well depend on the clear detection and resolute avoidance of the dangerous and maleficent form of what many identify as "civil religion." Admittedly the term is used with a variety of meanings, some of which are contradictory. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones have helpfully identified five principal usages or meanings: "*folk religion*," "*the transcendent universal*

[20]Robert A. Nisbet, *The Twilight of Authority* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 3.

religion of the nation," "*religious nationalism,*" "*the democratic faith,*" and "*Protestant civic piety.*"[21] Perhaps more helpful is Robert D. Linder's differentiation of two principal types: the "Deistic" type deriving from Rousseau, "in which the state is transcendent and embraces ultimate values and reality," and the "Theistic" type, "in which the state itself is subject to transcendental judgment and cannot claim ultimate values and reality." This may help to explain why Robert Bellah and D. Elton Trueblood commend as good and Richard V. Pierard and Mark O. Hatfield deplore as evil what all call "civil religion."[22] Any tendency toward absolutizing the state not only affords the danger of totalitarianism but also threatens the viability of historic religions other than the "civil religion." Can the malevolent form of "civil religion" be an attempted life jacket for a sinking political order or a sinking religion?

Sixth and last, the "free exercise" of religion, to be more than legal fiction or paper promises, calls for the existence of vital religion. Christians in particular are faced with the challenge of avoiding culture-religion on the one hand and exclusivist, other-worldly withdrawal on the other. Discipleship, as never before, needs to be essential to membership. Indeed, the "free exercise" of religion can only be truly meaningful where there is genuine, vital, and significant exercise thereof. High on the list of priorities is the question as to whether and which of the religious bodies in the United States will have the purpose, the religious and moral dynamic, and the motivated, loyal, and equipped personnel to make significant new advances in ways that are fully constitutional. Freedom of the press, for example, would be a relic of the past if there were no thriving newspapers and magazines in the nation. Similarly, the future significance of the "free exercise" of religion in the pluralistic society of the United States may depend as much or more on the vigor and vitality of the religious communities as on the verdicts of the judiciary.[23]

We have examined in detail the key documents advocating religious toleration and freedom during the classical period.[24] We have, amid the

[21]Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 14–18.

[22]Robert D. Linder, "Civil Religion in Historical Perspective: The Reality That Underlies the Concept," *Journal of Church and State* 17 (Autumn 1975): 419, 421 (fn. 50).

[23]Garrett, "The 'Free Exercise Clause' of the First Amendment," 398.

[24]These documents were examined in the first two of the three Day–Higginbotham Lectures. Tapes of these lectures are on file at Southwestern Baptist Seminary. (Editor: These lectures are now also available printed form in Wyman Lewis Richardson, ed., *The Collected Writings of James Leo Garrett Jr.*, 1950-2015, vol. 7 [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023], 97–122, 123–36.)

objection of obsolescence, sought to restate for 1976 the case for universal religious freedom and to deal responsibly with the problems and issues of its attainment and its continual implementation. One more thing remains. You and I must decide whether we are willing to give ourselves to the cause of religious freedom, not merely for ourselves but for all humankind. From the student body and faculty of Southwestern Seminary could come a groundswell of concern and action for oppressed peoples that would be felt around the world. We can shirk or make excuses or become preoccupied, or we can give ourselves without stint that we and others may be able "to obey God rather than men."

> Faith of our fathers! living still
> In spite of dungeon, fire, and sword,
> O how our hearts beat high with joy
> Whene'er we hear that glorious word!
> Faith of our fathers, holy faith!
> We will be true to thee till death.[25]

[25]Frederick W. Faber, "Faith of Our Fathers," in *Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1975), stanza 1.

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

***Baptist Political Theology*. Edited by Thomas S. Kidd, Paul D. Miller, and Andrew T. Walker. Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2023. ix + 774 pp. $59.99.**

"Befuddlement" and "intrigue" are the two terms that editors Thomas Kidd, Paul Miller, and Andrew Walker use to describe reactions to their efforts to bring to print this volume on Baptist political theology. One could be forgiven if they asked, "Do Baptists have a political theology?" Aside from their Free Church commitments, Baptists are often given little attention in considerations of Christian intellectual engagement with politics. This volume attempts to introduce and exemplify a distinctly Baptist political theology.

The editors explain the two-fold inspiration for this volume derives from their convictions that "responsible theological reflection demands the rigorous application of Baptist principles to the public arena" and that "there is more to the possibility of a Baptist political theology than first meets the eye" (1-2). The editors ground Baptist political theology in Baptist theological distinctives, including conversion, soul competency, believer's baptism, local church membership, and local church autonomy, which all stem from the post-Reformation emphasis on *sola scriptura*. They assert "an inner logic connects adult baptism, conversion, religious freedom, and disestablishment" (9). Baptists hold that no one is born into Christ's church; people can only be born again into it. Their convictions about the church and the ordinances translate into a distinct approach to political culture. The authors return to these themes again and again.

The book consists of two parts. The first part includes historical examinations of leading figures and prominent themes. It is comprised of seventeen essays, some of which analyze the life and work of an individual, some a few people, and others a historical era. The essays in the second part are written by Baptists who address a variety of topics, from natural

law to bioethics to economics. Such a hefty volume renders impossible a comprehensive review in this limited space. This book note will offer a brief overview, followed by positive appraisals of its contributions and friendly critiques of its insufficiencies.

Part One features historical essays which explore Baptist political reflection and engagement. Dustin Bruce considers the Reformation-era enmeshment of church and state to demonstrate the significance of early Baptist rejection of state influence. Michael Haykin provides a two-hundred-year overview of British Baptist political engagement from the beginnings of the Baptist movement to Andrew Fuller. James Calvin Davis gives the first of five chapters dedicated to the life and work of a single figure in Baptist history, with an analysis of the life and work of the sometime Baptist Roger Williams. Malcolm Yarnell's essay advances scholarship on the relationship of English Baptists with John Locke. He provides clarifying evidence, particularly regarding William Kiffen's relationship with Locke, and corrects frequently misattributed references which American Baptists made to Locke.

Kristina Benham and Thomas Kidd offer a helpful overview of Baptists during colonial and revolutionary America, demonstrating the transformation among many from "an uneasy relationship with American political authorities" to a "strongly positive, providential view of the American nation" (123). The following two chapters support this assertion. Casey Hough critically engages the life and work of John Leland, and Brandon O'Brien does the same for Isaac Backus. Unfortunately, several other authors in this volume encroach on their subject matter and offer less involved yet redundant analyses of Leland and Backus.

The next five chapters form a thematic unity, engaging a most vexing political-theological issue for American Baptists: slavery and its consequences. Tom Nettles explores antebellum Baptist debates about slavery. Eric M. Washington gives a historical overview of the Baptist movement and enslaved people as well as a long history of the Civil Rights movement. Gregory Wills provides a sweeping and impressively varied review of Baptist experiences in the American Civil War. Kenneth Reid's chapter on "The African American Baptist Tradition," and Daniel Lee Hill's examination of Martin Luther King Jr.'s political theology, complement Washington's essay and offer helpful analyses of the long-term impacts of American slavery on Baptist political engagement.

Aaron Douglas Weaver's chapter on Walter Rauschenbusch, Henlee

Barnette, and James Dunn makes for an interesting pair with the chapter on Carl F. H. Henry by Jason Duesing and Jesse Payne. Next follows an essay treating Billy Graham, Charles Colson, Richard Land, Albert Mohler, Russell Moore, and Jonathan Leeman. Including six thinkers in one chapter proves too much, and the analysis of two living contributors in the volume alongside Graham and Colson is odd.

Nathan Finn's "The Christian Right: From Reagan to Trump" provides a helpful analysis of late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century political engagement by Baptists with a special look at the Southern Baptist Convention. Finn's chapter might have been a substantial concluding chapter to Part One. Karen Swallow Prior's "Baptist Witness in a Post-Christian Culture" provides an astute analysis of the current cultural moment and makes a compelling call for Christian engagement, but it would fit better with the essays in Part Two.

Part Two consists of "a collective effort at applied political theology" (13). Jonathan Leeman opens with a description of and call to a uniquely Baptist political theology, charting a third way between the Scylla of theonomy and the Charybdis of secular liberalism. He identifies Baptist political theology with Baptist ecclesiology, an emphasis on religious freedom, a non-utopian approach to government, and the encouragement of Christians to "enter the public square as principled pragmatists with limited expectations" (511). Next, Andrew Walker makes a thorough argument for Baptist employment of natural law principles in public engagement. Albert Mohler follows with reflections on contemporary challenges to religious liberty. He offers the pessimistic prognosis: "religious freedom is now a liberty or set of liberties that can only manifest in the private confines of one's home or church—religious convictions, apparently, have no place in the public square" (552).

The next several chapters feature writers engaging a variety of political-theological issues: C. Ben Mitchell on human dignity in bioethics; J. Alan Branch on sexuality and gender; Andrew Spencer on environmentalism; Hunter Baker on economics; and Paul Miller on just war theory. Barry Hankins concludes Part Two with a reflective essay on "Baptists and American Evangelical Identity." Editors Paul Miller and Andrew Walker conclude the volume with a short essay that calls Baptists to engage actively in political society.

There is much to commend in this volume. Part One offers helpful introductions to the scholarship on leading Baptist political theologians

like Isaac Backus, John Leland, and Carl F. H. Henry. The chapters by Haykin, Benham/Kidd, Wills, and Finn taken together provide a helpful overview of Baptist political engagement over the past four-hundred years, but with a particular focus on America.

A chapter on the history of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention (ERLC) would have well-suited this volume. Various heads of the ERLC and its predecessor, the Christian Life Commission, make appearances in several essays (e.g., Foy Valentine, Richard Land, and Russell Moore). However, an institutional history of the Southern Baptist Convention's political theology arm merits its own chapter.

Part Two offers some quality reflections for today. Leeman's engaging call for Baptists to acknowledge their prophetic role in modern Babylon is much needed. Walker's argument for Baptist use of natural law is cogent. He attributes Baptist hesitancy towards natural law to its association with Roman Catholicism. His chapter could be complemented with either a comparative essay on Baptist political engagement in contrast to other Christian traditions or an essay on co-belligerency across Christian traditions.

This volume is large and sweeping. The back cover claims it "introduces readers to the full sweep of Baptist engagement with politics from the seventeenth century to today," but the editors are less ambitious. They limit the engagement to "Anglo-American history and contemporary topics of prominent concern" (13). A more fitting title for this volume would be *Anglo-American Baptist Political Theology: An Introduction*, but that has far less pop than *Baptist Political Theology*.

While this volume has much worthy of commendation, it is an unbalanced work. It has virtually nothing to say about Baptists outside the United States and England. The Baptist World Alliance is mentioned in only three chapters, and English Baptists who lived after the American Revolution are almost completely absent. Transnational examinations reveal national parochialisms and give fuller orbed representations of international movements. Transnational analysis would better identify what makes a distinctively "Baptist" political theology rather than a mostly Southern Baptist political theology with nods to other American Baptists.

Baptist Political Theology shows that Baptists have contributed, and are contributing, intellectually to political-theological engagement. Few will read this work cover-to-cover, but any who open it will find essays that

will challenge them to think better about the lives of Christians as dual citizens. May Baptists' political engagement grow out of their biblical commitments while we await Christ's return.

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BOOK REVIEWS

***Embedded Genres in the New Testament: Understanding Their Impact for Interpretation*. By Jeannine Brown. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024, 145 pp., $24.99.**

Jeannine Brown in her work, *Embedded Genres in the New Testament*, analyzes genres within their literary framework yielding relevant, interpretive insights. Jeannine Brown serves as the David Price Professor of Biblical and Theological Foundations at Bethel Seminary. She is the author of *Scripture and Communication, The Gospel as Stories*, as well as commentaries on Matthew and Philippians. Her work in hermeneutics and genre provides the impetus for this monograph—her purpose: to engender sensitivity to embedded genres by investigating three test cases in the New Testament.

In Chapter 2 (7-48), Brown examines a *potential* embedded genre of poetry within Philippians. The nature of poetry in the first century is discussed first, followed by an investigation into the macrolevel and microlevel structures of the passage, 2:6-11. In a detailed comparison of poetic lines, the author teases out poetic envelops, patterns, and repetitions. The microlevel conventions identified—parataxis, alternating conjunctions, and parallelism—help in determining four sets of parallel lines. Brown then points out the biblical author's concise, particular language choices. All of this to show that the embedded poetic genre is transformed by the letter genre according to contextual emphases. In other words, Paul's placement of the poem underscores his paraenetic, persuasive aim, and by moving to poetry, Paul invites a whole-person response (46).

In Chapter 3 (49-82), the author examines a riddle embedded within Matthew's Gospel narrative. An overview is given concerning the use of riddles in ancient times pointing out the requirements of (1) ambiguity and (2) interrogative sense. Matthew signals the presence of riddles through the speakers and audience within the narrative. Brown singles out a "riddle session" when Jesus is questioned (21:23-22:46), a passage comprised of

initial dueling questions, two son parables, and three trick questions in rapid succession. In the final riddle, Jesus provides a cryptic answer to the question that began the initial riddle. The interrogative significance of identifying this "riddle" genre embedded in a narrative is that the narrative story line potentially makes the riddle "less riddle-like" (78). Jesus is an expert riddler, and Matthew demonstrates the Christological truth of Jesus as sage and embodiment of divine wisdom.

In Chapter 4 (83-120), a description of the prominence and purpose of the household code in 1 Peter is discussed in light of Greco-Roman domestic codes. Brown draws out the "marked" features—those elements that defy the normal parameters expected in household codes—and "unmarked" features—those elements that align with typical household codes. The embedded genre and framework send a clear message that any offensive behavior should only arise from their complete allegiance to Christ (115). Hermeneutically, the impact of the household code on the letter is analyzed as well as the impact of the letter on the household code—a bidirectional observation.

In the final pages (124-26), the author encourages exploration: to be sensitive to subtle movements between the micro and macro genres, which can bring forth interpretive insights. The author accomplishes her goal by sifting out possible semantic valences of an embedded genre within a larger whole to determine meaning. The book is not exhaustive; rather, it is didactic, comparable to three extended lectures that engage the reader and offer the interpreter relevant vocabulary and considerations to aid in interpretation. In essence, Brown's book adds precision to one or more of the traditional exegetical steps in the hermeneutical process.

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God, vol. 1, Theology for Every Person. By Malcolm B. Yarnell III. Brentwood, TN: B&H, 2024, 272 pp., $24.99.

Why is it necessary to have another systematic theology? Yarnell, research professor of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, draws upon the comprehension and ethos of the systematic theology of his mentor James Leo Garrett Jr. (1925-2020). Yarnell, following Garrett, continues

the theological pedigree of Southwestern Seminary initiated by Walter Thomas Connor (1877-1952). Yarnell identifies his institutional purpose at the end of the book: "I write these volumes to make Southwestern Seminary's classical empowering theology more accessible to all the people of God" (250).

In accord with his mentor's hope as well as his, i.e., that the people of God would grow "through good doctrine and ethics," Yarnell's delicate and humble effort is clearly displayed through a vivid picture of the whole biblical and theological flow of doctrinal description so that every person can enjoy entering the life of God to see the glory of God. Moreover, he shows aesthetically how colloquial terms perfectly fit the technical conceptions of theology in a balanced manner. In other words, the frame and reader-friendly terms of his conversational style make theology approachable for those who seek to understand the biblical basis, historical interpretation, and theological significance of each doctrine. At the same time, however, it is fascinating to read the author's mindset. Yarnell's wording simultaneously conveys a biblical conciseness and theological thickness.

Two prominent aspects among many other encouraging points in the system of the book include the Trinity and the Bible. Firstly, throughout the whole book, Yarnell's writing resonates with reverence toward the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Based on the paradoxical but wonderfully harmonious attributes of God the Trinity as pure act, e.g., of God's transcendence and immanence, and of divine holiness, divine love, and divine righteousness, his system points toward God in ontology and economy.

An example of Yarnell's emphasis on God the Trinity is seen in his construction of a "Trinitarian Model of Revelation" (133). Yarnell continues his Trinitarian "theology of Scripture" with a "Trinitarian economy of revelation" and a "Logos-Pneuma Ontology of Scripture" (204). His preferred model of revelation is offered only after reviewing the famous six models of revelation by Avery Dulles.

Secondly, Yarnell explicates the core truths of Christianity through surveying the whole biblical narrative and through concise reflections upon relevant individual Scripture texts. He thereby avoids the typical and sometimes unhelpful way of delivering and arranging theology as a series of abstractions. He also avoids incorporating unnecessary arguments in systematic theology. For example, throughout the entire section on special revelation, the reader can dive immediately into the full-orbed gospel of

God revolving around Jesus Christ the Lord and Savior through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The most interesting aspect of Yarnell's system is the structure of volume one, which illuminates his own mature theological methodology. How should one approach God the Trinity and the revelation of God in Scripture? Contrary to many evangelical systematic theologies, God deals first with God the Trinity and then with Scripture. Yarnell provides his full rationale for beginning God's story with God Himself later in the book:

> Yet I also intentionally place Scripture after our exposition of God the Trinity and his attributes, thereby reasserting the supremacy of God as Trinity over his elect means of revelation. This method retains the benefits of the other methods while equally recognizing the Father sending the Son and the Spirit, and the leading roles of both the divine Word and the divine Spirit in Scripture. I, therefore, locate the ontology of Scripture in the Trinitarian economy through its dependence upon the God who is and who acts as *Logos*, "Word," and *Pneuma*, "Spirit" (202-203).

This reviewer finds Yarnell's argument persuasive. If the purpose of a theological method is to better explain God, his Word, and his will for his people, this method seems more legitimate. Placing God first is biblically rooted, for "God" simply is before he acts (cf. Gen. 1:1). This method is also contextually perceptive, correcting modern ignorance about theology proper.

Theologians have the privilege of knowing and studying God through his revelation. At the same time, they have the responsibility to pass the right understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ to following generations. If the theological statement, "every Christian is a theologian," is justifiable, and it is, then all the people of God have this same privilege and responsibility. We must all be concerned to proclaim, "good doctrine and ethics." Yarnell has begun to accomplish his primary goal in the first volume of the trilogy entitled, "Theology for Every Person."

I highly recommend this first volume of Yarnell's popular-level systematic theology, God. It invites you into the "Grand Tour," wherein you encounter the Triune God and his revelation and wherein you can

begin exploring the marvelous world that he created, is redeeming, and will bring to his chosen end.

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***Cultural Sanctification: Engaging the World like the Early Church.* By Stephen O. Presley. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024, 220 pp., $24.99.**

Christians today are faced with an opportunity to discern how to respond to an increasingly hostile pagan culture in the West. Amid this juncture, it is easy to perceive that the best way forward is either to enact the Pope Benedict option by withdrawing from society or take up arms in the culture war. In his latest work, *Cultural Sanctification*, Stephen Presley offers a mediating solution to this discussion recognizing that Christendom has fallen in the West, and – in referencing Charles Taylor – a secular age has replaced it. Despite this cultural and religious transition, Christians have a fresh opportunity to represent Christ amid a hostile environment. Presley concludes that, rather than withdrawing from the culture or resorting to an aggressive confrontative posture, Christians should look to the ancient wisdom found in the early church, which faced a similarly hostile culture that believers are engulfed in today. Presley accomplishes this by drawing from early church voices such as Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Augustine, and others, each demonstrating the process of cultural sanctification. Cultural Sanctification is a masterful and much needed contribution that adds to the engagement provided by, most relevantly, Carl Trueman in *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. This work functions as a practical addendum to Trueman's robust historical accounting.

Presley is a senior fellow for religion and public life at the Center for Religion, Culture, and Democracy and associate professor of church history at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Along with his proficient work on Irenaeus in *The Intertextual Reception of Genesis 1-3*, Presley has contributed heavily to the patristic field through his numerous works and interactions that seek to provide wisdom to modern Christians by recovering the ancient wisdom of the early church. This same focus is the aim of his newest contribution, *Cultural Sanctification: Engaging the*

World like the Early Church.

Presley delineates the early church's cultural sanctification by observing its identity, citizenship, and public engagement. In the first chapter of this volume, Presley posits how the early church developed a distinctly Christian identity both theologically and morally through catechesis and liturgy (40-54). A healthy Christian identity naturally led to an appropriate response through a sound political theology and public engagement. In chapters two and three, Presley asserts that the early church maintained the scriptural balance of honoring the governmental authorities yet remaining faithful to their Christian identity (63). This was coupled with the early church's robust public intellectual contributions, notably exemplified by the second-century apologists (105).

The public engagement of the early church did not remain merely intellectual. In chapter four, Presley extends his notations about the early church's public engagement to its emphasis on holiness, as represented by the early believer's willingness to serve their neighbors in practical yet discerning ways (121). Despite Presley's despairing yet correct conclusions about the current culture made at the outset of his work, his final two chapters serve as a reminder of the hope Christians have in the gospel of Jesus. Despite the loss of many of the West's strong Christian institutions, this should never cause believers to despair (165).

Presley's most decisive contribution to the conversation surrounding the conundrum of an increasingly hostile culture is his encouragement for Christians to uphold a strong identity that derives from robust participation in the local church. The early church recognized the need for intense modes of catechesis and liturgy that functioned as the foundation for a proper response to Rome's pagan ethos. As Presley rightly remarks, spiritual formation through the local church led to the enactment of a rule of faith that sought the coming of the glory of God rather than the glory of Rome (49). Rightly so, the church is ground zero for Christians to begin the process of cultural sanctification.

A profound characteristic of Presley's work is how he encourages believers not to fall into despair because of Christ's hopeful return. However, readers might conclude that – given the demise of Christendom – there is no longer a hope in the West for any form of Christian society to return. While a simple return to the past is not the proper solution, Presley's work might benefit from considering a more hopeful future for the West. Notably, if Christians participate in cultural sanctification, it will offer

an opportunity to rehabilitate the West, given the faithfulness of God's people. That is not to say this outcome is guaranteed, yet the remnant remains of the Christian West persists, and a better future is possible.

In writing *Cultural Sanctification*, Presley has provided Christians with a beautiful gift to both the layperson and academic. Yet it is perhaps most relevant to pastors across the West who are faced with opportunities to counsel their congregants as they struggle with how to live Christianly in a secular age. As Presley admits, retrieving the ancient wisdom of the early church does not automatically solve every cultural issue under the sun. Nevertheless, it strengthens the resolve and solidifies the church's distinctly Christian identity. It also puts in perspective that, even if the culture remains in darkness, Christians can live with hope while participating in the public square consistent with a faithful witness for the benefit of the church and to the glory of God.

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***Creation and Christian Ethics: Understanding God's Designs for Humanity and the World*. By Dennis P. Hollinger. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023, 304 pp., $29.99.**

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Old Testament theology began to pay more attention to creation accounts. It grounds the Old Testament law on creation as Walter Brueggemann states in his *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1997. Bruce Waltke also states the creation narratives undergird the Ten Commandments (*An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*, 2007). John Goldingay explains how broadly the creation order impacts legal ethics (*Old Testament Theology*, volume 3, Israel's Life, 2009). Christopher Wright also asserts a connection between creation and Israelite law (*Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 2004). Now Dennis P. Hollinger, president emeritus and senior distinguished professor of Christian ethics at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, follows this pattern to place the creation story as the foundation of the Christian ethics.

In the Introduction, "Why Creation for Ethics," creation is based on Genesis 1-2. It is about the character of the world and its implications.

The reasons to start the discussion of Christian ethics with creation are five-fold: The biblical story is incomplete without creation; creation is a central theme throughout Scripture; the doctrine of the Trinity is related to creation; the final new creation is a renewing of what God created in the beginning; and finally, creation is full of salient ethical themes. Then in Chapter 1, "In the Beginning God," Hollinger explains God loves humans, designed the whole universe, and spoke to create the universe and reveal Himself in nature and in the written and living Word. This is the fundamental concept for creation ethics.

"It's a Good World After All" is the title of Chapter 2, where money, sex, and power, traps of Christian ministry, are declared as good gifts of God, but one needs to experience redemption in Christ and live by the power of the Holy Spirit to not misuse them to dishonor God who created them.

Chapter 3, "Made in the Image of God," explains the value and dignity of humans. The dignity of all people should avoid racism and ethnocentrism. Dignity in the whole of life should be applied to the issues of abortion and euthanasia. Hollinger clearly states human worth and dignity are not based on one's attributes, functions, or assessment by others.

In Chapter 4, "Creation Care," the worldviews of anthropocentrism, biocentrism, and theocentrism are compared and discussed. The author explains the biblical view of theocentric foundations beginning with the creation story in Genesis 1-2, then from the rest of Scripture. This chapter ends with suggestions on how to care for God's creation.

"Created for Relationship" has two chapters. Part 1 is about sexuality, marriage, sex, and family (Chapter 5). The first time that something is not good is about the singleness of Adam (Gen. 2:18). In discussing the current issues, the author differentiates between Christian ethics, pastoral care, and public policy. Pastoral care should have love, understanding, and empathy for a person who is not normal. In public policy, although the rights of transgender people should be protected, the rights of all individuals should be protected, too. Hollinger emphasizes marriage has a creation paradigm. Egalitarian marriage is consistent with the creation pattern, but the same-sex union is not. In discussing physical intimacy, sexual acts should be for Christians an act of spiritual intimacy that nurtures and deepens their relationship with God.

Part 2 of "Created for Relationship" includes other major institutions: the church, education, the media, leisure, economics, and government (Chapter 6). Hollinger asks for wisdom, prayer, and conversation with

other Christians to reach an ethical stand in this complex world. He classifies Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC as propaganda agencies, not news stations. He states that a market (not command) economy is our least fallen choice. He argues, contrary to St. Augustine, that government is needed even if there is no human fall.

Chapter 7, "Created to Work," explains the biblical perspective on work. Hollinger connects work with the creation story and the rest of the biblical story. He points out that Adam's fall impacts the meaning of work, lays the theological foundation for the work ethic, and discusses work's ethical principles and virtues. God instituting the "Sabbath" into a rhythm of life for worship, self-care, and justice is the topic of Chapter 8. The emphasis is not on the specific day but on the principles. Hollinger begins with the Sabbath and the Decalogue and discusses all the relevant passages in the Scripture. He comments on the different views on the Sabbath in the church's history and says it does not affect the underlying principles. Finally, he details the ethical implications of the Sabbath commandment for today.

The penultimate chapter on human finitude goes from the creation story to the rest of the Scriptures to demonstrate that we are "limited and dependent" beings, on others and God. The fall is a rejection of finitude. Hollinger concludes with implications of human finitude for ethical issues of utopias, eugenics, transhumanism, and euthanasia. Accepting our finitude does not mean accepting the status quo, or against advancement to better human life, but staying within the confines of God's design.

The final chapter summarizes the philosophical underpinning of the Christian ethic, human beings are "embodied souls or ensouled bodies." Hollinger accepts both and connects them to the creation story. He develops the ethical implications in evangelism and social concern, artificial intelligence and the technicization of humans, and virtual gatherings for worship and work. He decries the ubiquitousness of technology, rejects virtual worship, and concludes we can never revert to a purely material approach to life or a purely spiritual approach.

In the short conclusion, Hollinger emphasizes the importance of living out a creation ethic in a pluralistic, complex, and fallen world. He dislikes the withdrawal or defiance model, and criticizes conservative or progressive Christians; instead, he advocates a faithful presence model, proposed by James Hunter. We must build a bridge to get a hearing on the creation ethics. Overall, this is a very good book on Christian ethics. Each

chapter has its conclusion, which is helpful. Compared to Ken Magnuson's *Invitation to Christian Ethics*, this book does not give details in countering non-biblical positions. Magnuson's is suitable as a textbook, and this book as a supplemental reading. This book accepts egalitarian marriage but does not comment on Eve being created as a helper to complement Adam. Regarding creation as the foundation of ethics, it is not clearly stated in the creation account, but only by implications. It is possible to build evangelical ethics on a broader basis, Oliver O'Donovan builds it on the created order, eschatology and history, and knowledge in Christ.

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Criswell: His Life and Times. **By O. S. Hawkins. Brentwood, TN: B&H Publishing, 2024. 241 pp., $27.99.**

There arose a generation who did not know W. A. Criswell. Most of my current students have never heard of this once-famous, highly influential Southern Baptist pastor. He is special to me because I was saved, licensed, and ordained under his ministry at First Baptist Church of Dallas. So, I welcome this biography of Criswell by O. S. Hawkins, chancellor and senior professor of pastoral ministry and evangelism at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Hawkins had a unique relationship with Criswell, being his chosen successor (xiii, 64, 172, 224) and enjoying a friendship and mentorship that spanned decades (xii). Criswell was pastor at First Baptist Dallas for 50 years (1944-94, the last 4 years overlapping with Gregory and Hawkins), followed by Joel Gregory (1990-92) and O. S. Hawkins (1993-1997). Hawkins served as President/CEO of Guidestone Financial Resources from 1997 until his retirement in 2022.

This book is a sequel to Hawkin's book *In the Name of God: The Colliding Lives, Legends, and Legacies of J. Frank Norris and George W. Truett*, recalling the influence both prominent pastors had on Criswell. Hawkins gleaned much information from the Oral History Project at Baylor University about Criswell's admiration of Norris's passion and pathos in preaching (2, 4, 36). Most of this enjoyable book is a decade-by-decade, 1940s-90s, description of Criswell's accomplishments along with many interesting

stories of this larger-than-life pastor. Hawkins does well in setting the tone of each decade by mentioning prominent people and events in the United States (29, 74-75, 128-31).

Four emphases throughout the book can engage, enlighten, and inspire the reader, as a good Christian biography should do. First, Criswell's fiery expository preaching was based on his love of the Bible and his zeal for sharing the gospel. His favorite verse was Isaiah 40:8 (230). Second, the providential hand of God was evident throughout Criswell's life. He never dated a girl until late at seminary, when he met and married Betty Harris, his long-time helpmate (57-59). Each pastorate came about through a series of unusual events, including Betty telegraphing FBC Dallas that W. A. would preach there one Sunday after he explicitly told her that he would not do so (34, 80). His vivid dreams (visions?) of being told by Truett to be his successor and then years later being told that Hawkins should be Criswell's successor are certainly intriguing (64, 84-85, 223). Third, Anna Criswell's strong guidance of W. A. through college shows the positive influence of a godly mother who sacrificed for her sons (19-33). She influenced him to be open to God using women in ministry, and he strongly supported women on staff at FBC Dallas (106-10, 113). Fourth, Hawkins mentions some of Criswell's idiosyncrasies and regrets, devoting chapter 13 to the latter, showing that Criswell was a sinner saved by God's grace.

Here are some additional positive features. The chapter on Criswell's support of Jewish people and modern Israel and how this fits with his dispensational premillennial eschatology was especially insightful (189-204). Hawkins makes good use of humor throughout the book (17, 178, 201, 228), such as a quotation from the "Wheelbarrow Sermon" (147). Some anecdotes are especially moving and make great sermon illustrations, such as when pastor John Hicks on his deathbed lamented having an insignificant ministry, but he evidently forgot about a revival service he preached long ago in Texline when young Criswell got saved and told Hicks, "I'm going to be a preacher" (22-23). As a student at Baylor University, Criswell went after classes each day to preach in an impoverished area along the Brazos River called Sand Town (38). Criswell's spontaneous song one day on the lawn of Mullins Hall at Southern Seminary touched the heart of student Paul Crandall. He was going to quit seminary but reconsidered after hearing Criswell sing "It Pays to Serve Jesus" (56).

Hawkins is an excellent preacher and an engaging writer, as was Criswell. While noting some Criswellian tendencies to exaggeration or overstatement

(170, fn. 20), Hawkins occasionally enjoys the same practice, as many pastors do (70, 80, 113, 165, 218). Some stories in the book are repeated, such as the selling of the Criswell antiques, including a set of China owned by Adolf Hitler (69, 103-04, 221), and stating that contrary to Criswell's claim of innovating the age-graded Sunday School, it was Norris who did so twenty years earlier (89, 112-13). An index and the addition of photographs, especially from Criswell's early years, would have been a welcome addition to this volume, yet the publisher precluded them. However, none of these minor shortcomings detract from this engaging biography.

Since Criswell was a longtime pastor at an important church, there are many memorable stories about him. No doubt people who knew him have favorite anecdotes they wish were included in this volume, but its purpose was not to be comprehensive. This book is an enjoyable and insightful description of a highly influential evangelical pastor in the second half of the twentieth century, admiringly written by one of his successors. Students, pastors, and laypeople will benefit from reading this inspiring volume. Criswell might have put it like this, "Ah, lad, ten thousand times ten thousand thanksgivings for your profoundly reverential and magnificently benevolent biography, but beware what you say about Betty."

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SOUTHWESTERN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARDS

The faculty of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary honor each of the following books with a 2024 *Southwestern Journal of Theology* Book Award, commending both authors and publishers for their excellent contributions to Christian scholarship.

THE BOOK OF THE YEAR

Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically, by Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Zondervan Academic)

BIBLE REFERENCE/BIBLICAL BACKGROUNDS

Behind the Scenes of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts, edited by Bruce W. Longenecker, Elizabeth E. Shively, and T. J. Lang (Baker Academic)

Honorable Mentions:

Jerusalem through the Ages, by Jodi Magness (Oxford University Press)

Apocryphal Prophets and Athenian Poets: Noncanonical Influences of the New Testament, by Gregory R. Lanier (B&H Academic)

BIBLICAL STUDIES

Wonders from Your Law: Nexus Passages and the Promise of an Exegetical Intertextual Old Testament Theology, by Kevin S. Chen (IVP Academic)

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The State of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research, edited by H. H. Hardy II and M. Daniel Carroll R. (Baker Academic)

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