



Demanding Liberty: An Untold Story of American Religious Freedom

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The Past Has a Lot to Teach Us

This book is as much about today as it is about the past. It tells the story of the life and work of Isaac Backus, an important figure about whom I think more Christians ought to know. At key points in Backus's story, I draw connections to the present. Most of the time, I describe how some part of Backus's story or another affected me, shaped my thinking, adjusted my posture, and so forth. I am not qualified to tell you how to apply this historical narrative in your own life. That will be your job. You'll be frustrated with me about this at some point. That's fine. Because ultimately my goal is to encourage reflection on the past that results in reflection about the present. The title of the book, *Demanding Liberty*, alludes to this goal. There are two ways to read the title. "Demanding" can be a verb, in the sense that Isaac Backus spent more than half a century *demanding* liberty. "Demanding" can also be an adjective, in the sense that those who enjoy a greater measure of liberty than Backus and others did, must steward their liberty well. Doing so is *demanding*.

Backus's faith journey has helped me make sense of my own. The Christian tradition in which I was raised was generous and gracious – they were the ones who taught me to love Jesus, and for that I'll always be grateful. Nevertheless, on a number of subjects they created some confusion for me about the nature of our shared faith.

Our faith was shot through with patriotism and our patriotism shot through with faith. I didn't realize this until college, but it became clear to me during my sophomore year, when I roomed with an Austrian student named Sammy. The exact details of this story escape me now, but the salient parts are these: we attended a church service together one Sunday and when we returned to our room, Sammy expressed deep concern about a symbol in the sanctuary. Most of what he saw was what he expected – a baptistery, an empty cross, a Communion table. What caught him by surprise was the presence of a flag. He couldn't understand why there would be an American flag in a house of worship. I couldn't understand why there shouldn't be. *Wasn't a national flag in a house of worship evidence of unfaithful collusion between church and state?* he wondered. It's a fair question from someone raised in a country with a living memory of Nazism. It turns out patriotic symbolism is not an essential part of Christian worship everywhere on the globe. That was news to me.

For years I'd puzzled over questions like, Why do so many Christians I know insist that America was founded on Christian principles, yet vehemently insist that the state has no right to meddle in church affairs? Why do so many Christians I know celebrate the religious liberties America protects, yet support federal initiatives to limit the liberties of certain religious groups? Why do so many Christians I know champion the separation of church and state, yet seem to expect the government to support Christian activities through tax exemption and other forms of subsidy?

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BOOK EXCERPT

Historian Brandon J. O'Brien unveils the untold story of Isaac Backus. He worked to secure religious liberty and freedom of conscience for all Americans, not just for one particular denomination or religious tradition. Backus lived in an age of both religious revival and growing secularism, competing forces much like those at work today. Then and now, people fiercely argue about the role of government and the limits of liberty. The past speaks into the present as we continue to demand liberty and justice for all.

In this journey to crack the shell of American Christianity and find the kernel of true faith inside, Isaac Backus was the first reliable guide from history that I encountered. I think it's because he spoke my language. He was a Baptist like me and like the people who brought me up in the faith. He was a product of revival, just as I was. And while his populism and mine had different sources and histories, he felt like a man of the people. He was thoughtful, but he wasn't a theorist. He was a pastor, and all his writings bear the stamp of someone who is concerned with how the subject at hand should apply in a normal person's life. Backus was an armchair historian and theologian, a keen observer of human nature. He was, in contemporary terms, an activist.

If he was nothing else, Isaac Backus was a tireless advocate of religious liberty for almost his entire adult life. That alone would make his story worth telling. But the fact that Backus *had to fight* for religious liberty, the fact that for more than half a century he labored within a much-maligned and often persecuted religious minority, tells us something very important about the America Backus lived and died in. It was not a forgone conclusion before 1800 that the religious practices of all Americans should be equally protected under the law.

It's helpful to remember from the very beginning of this story that the citizens of this country have debated what religious liberty means and what freedoms should be protected since before the English colonies became united states. Based on our experience in the twenty-first century, it may seem that America has never been more divided over religious issues. The Pew Research Center reported in late 2016 that the American public was almost exactly divided on the question of whether "wedding-related businesses, such as caterers and florists, should be required to serve same-sex couples who want to marry, even if the owner of these establishments objects to homosexuality for religious reasons." It can be tempting to read a statistic like that as evidence of decline from a previous age, when most people essentially agreed about what basic religious liberty entails. Professional historians will have a more textured and nuanced understanding of America's history than that. But in my experience, the average American—more specifically, the average evangelical American—tends to assume that there was a golden age of religious liberty sometime in the past, and we have been in decline since the 1960s or so.

If Isaac Backus were alive today, he would feel the need to correct the misperception that there was ever a "long-standing American tradition of accommodating religious practice and expression" in the years before or even *after* the Constitution was ratified. He might tell us about the time his mother was arrested for refusing to pay religious taxes. He might tell us about the time a congregation of New England Baptists had their property seized and their orchards destroyed for holding unauthorized worship services. He would almost certainly tell us about the time he debated with John and Samuel Adams about how *claiming* to defend religious liberty was not enough. The laws had to be *enforced* if they were to matter at all.

— Adapted from the introduction



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Religious Liberty Is About More Than Legislation

What inspired you to write *Demanding Liberty*?

O'Brien: I was motivated, first, by spending a lot of time reading the works of Isaac Backus as part of my dissertation research. The more I got to know him the more he came to embody so much about the American (and American-evangelical) spirit. The world he lived in and the challenges he faced feel strangely contemporary. I learned a lot from him, and I hope I can help others learn something from him, too.

Why is this such a timely book?

O'Brien: Americans are debating religious liberty on many fronts these days. American evangelicals need historical and theological foundations for discussing religious liberty. I hope this book is a step in that direction.

What is the message at the heart of *Demanding Liberty*?

O'Brien: At the center of the book is the story of Isaac Backus, a man who became “born again” during the First Great Awakening and battled for religious liberty until he died more than fifty years later. His story illustrates that religious liberty is an ideal that America has never fully realized; there’s always been a lot of work to do and there is still a lot of work to do. His example points us toward some helpful postures and approaches in our own time.

How is your approach to the topic of religious liberty unique?

O'Brien: This approach is distinctive, I believe, because it is story driven. It’s not a theoretical or philosophical treatise on religious liberty. It’s not an in-depth dissection of current events. It touches on both of those things. But it does so by elevating the example of one extremely relatable historical figure.

What do you hope readers learn from this book?

O'Brien: It is unhelpful to say America has always been about religious liberty. The truth is more complicated than that.

Religious liberty has a deeply Christian and theological heritage. Thinking about it in those terms can help us articulate positions in our contemporary context.

Religious liberty is about more than legislation. It’s also about our posture toward one another and the culture of engagement and dialogue we help (or hinder) to foster.