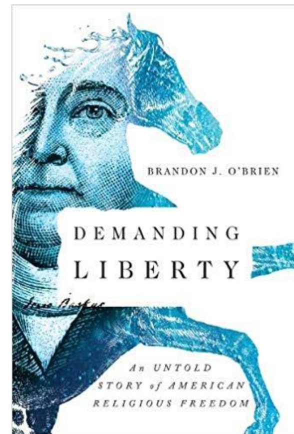
BOOK REVIEWS

Brandon J. O'Brien. ***Demanding Liberty: An Untold Story of American Religious Freedom.*** **Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018. Pp. 1-173. ISBN 978-0830845286. Paperback $17.00.**



Isaac Backus is not a household name. But in Brandon O'Brien's telling, perhaps he should be. A Baptist minister who endured a long history of state repression, Backus ultimately became one of the foremost advocates for the religious freedom Americans have enjoyed since the Founding. And the achievement of this liberty, as O'Brien takes pains to establish, was by no means a foregone conclusion.

But O'Brien's project extends beyond simple history: at bottom, he's interested in offering an account of religious liberty that resonates with contemporary Christians (and, hopefully, others). That account, he argues, must be grounded in distinctly *Christian* principles rather than merely *American* ones. Backus' story, in turn, serves to illustrate this larger theme.

In O'Brien's telling, Backus' story began with the First Great Awakening—a period of intense religious fervor in America, frequently characterized by dramatic revival services and an emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Backus became a preacher himself after experiencing a call to the ministry, but quickly found himself at odds with existing churches over his narrow conception of church fellowship.

This was not Backus' only controversial theological stance: the practice of baptism figures prominently in O'Brien's account. For much of

his life, Backus vacillated between criticizing and defending infant baptism—the prevailing norm of his time—before finally repudiating the practice and formally identifying as Baptist. His conclusion had unexpectedly political implications: for Backus, infant baptism was inextricably linked to the state-established church. Under such a regime, the act of baptism necessarily conflated membership in the Kingdom of God with citizenship in the extant political order—which, for Backus, was theologically unacceptable.

Such a view was diametrically opposed to that of the "Standing Order"—a loose network of Congregationalist churches, staunchly committed to Reformed theology and closely intertwined with the existing governmental power. When confronted with critiques from Baptist and Quaker colonists, the Standing Order refused to cede its dominion quietly: colonial governments levied a punishing set of taxes on religious dissidents, ostensibly for the upkeep of the state-established churches.

With the American Revolution looming on the horizon, in 1773 Backus published his best-known work: *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty*. He argued that civil government, insofar as it is necessarily composed of sinful human beings, cannot lead citizens into a state of pristine, Edenic liberty; true emancipation can come only through the redemptive work of Christ, as made manifest in the church. In more concrete terms, Backus took the view that the Standing Order's conflation of temporal and spiritual authority tainted the work of the church with the often-sinful machinations of political power, keeping people from attaining the freedom offered by Jesus. For Backus, this poison could not be allowed to fester in the new American nation. Such a theological paradigm, in Backus' view, necessarily formed the core of any case—political or otherwise—for religious liberty.

Backus' stance is a compelling one—and, as O'Brien points out, it is a position infrequently articulated today. In the American popular consciousness, early colonial religious history frequently collapses into

ready stereotypes: the dour Puritanism of early New England, the humanism of the Framers, and so on. Those caricatures are precisely what O'Brien sets out to subvert: in his account, Backus was able to embrace fundamental principles of classical liberalism without forgoing his conservative theological views.

Might the modern church learn something from Backus' example? O'Brien, perhaps unsurprisingly, thinks so. As the director of content and distribution for Tim Keller's Manhattan church planting nonprofit, Redeemer City to City, O'Brien generally channels the optimistic ecumenism of those in Keller's orbit: for him, Backus is clearly a positive role model, an example of how contemporary Christians ought to comport themselves in a society wracked by conflicts over the nature and extent of religious liberty. The historical record reveals that Backus was theologically grounded, deeply principled, and politically insightful—exactly as contemporary Christians should be.

To the extent *Demanding Liberty* straightforwardly argues for the importance of its subject, the book is a great success. O'Brien has crafted a fascinating look at a largely unknown figure in American history, whose ideas have enjoyed an outsize impact and whose courage is worthy of admiration.

But the second element of O'Brien's thesis is rather more provocative: that religious liberty is best defended not through appeals to the *American* tradition, but to the *Christian* tradition in particular. In *Demanding Liberty*'s telling, Backus' use of intrinsically theological resources allowed him to build out a stronger case for religious freedom than those circulating elsewhere within the marketplace of ideas.

But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that from a pragmatic standpoint, Backus' case for religious liberty only succeeds if governing authorities—or, at the very least, the general culture—operate from generally Christian philosophical premises. At one point, that was undoubtedly the case; the modern landscape, however, is profoundly different. Unlike the figures Backus confronted in his time, those figures

that presently hold power are unlikely to be moved by appeals to biblical and theological authority. Thus, an alternative discourse may be required in the public square.

Such alternatives have been readily forthcoming. As the one-time consensus afforded by American "civil religion" has broken down, many advocates for religious freedom have shifted their arguments to concentrate on nonsectarian "American" values—dignity, autonomy, diversity, and so forth. Others have revisited ancient questions of natural law and natural theology. A notable exemplar of this latter approach is Kevin Seamus Hasson's *Believers, Thinkers, and Founders: How We Came to Be One Nation Under God*, which suggests that the need for religious liberty is rooted in the fundamental mystery of the "philosopher's God" accessible to human reason. Both approaches sharply contrast with Backus' strategy, but offer perhaps a surer political footing in an increasingly secular age.

Though O'Brien doesn't emphasize it at great length, perhaps the most interesting takeaway from *Demanding Liberty* is a point Backus himself intuited: the fact that there is an essential tension between the practice of Christian baptism and the commitments of national citizenship. Such an argument was developed recently by James K.A. Smith in *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*. To be initiated into the Kingdom of God is to have one's foundational loyalties reconfigured, to join with Jesus over Caesar if and when the two domains conflict.

Many contemporary readers—Smith among them—would likely argue that infant baptism is a far more "political" act than believer's baptism, insofar as the former commits a child to a tradition and faith without their express consent. Interestingly, for Backus the reverse was true: infant baptism was necessarily bound up with uncritical assimilation into an existing socio-religious order. The underlying principle, however, is the same in both cases. To truly be *the church*, the church's spiritual authority over its members must trump that of the state. The church is a counter-*polis*, an alternative community.

Isaac Backus clearly grasped that reality—and contemporary Christians would do well to heed his insights, even when they carry a painful cost.

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