

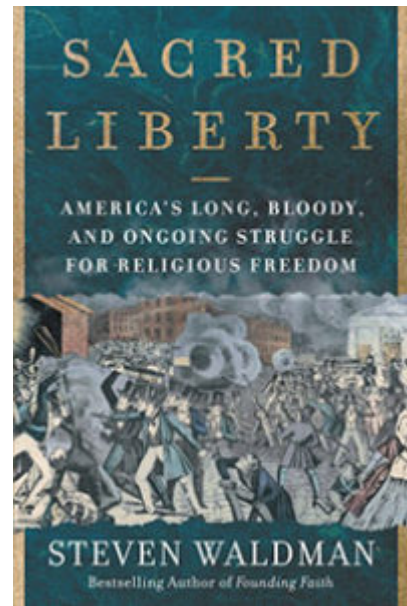
Review: Sacred Liberty

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Sacred Liberty

By Steven Waldman (HarperOne)

Religion has flourished in the United States when untethered from government entanglement and allowed to compete in a free marketplace of ideas, author Steven Waldman asserts. However, too many Americans have short memories—including members of previously persecuted religious minorities who want to claim privilege when their numbers grow.



The subtitle of Waldman's book—*America's Long, Bloody, and Ongoing Struggle for Religious Freedom*—captures one of the author's main ideas. Americans did not achieve religious liberty without conflict, and it remains a fragile freedom.

Waldman, co-founder of [Beliefnet](http://Beliefnet.com), points to James Madison as the single individual most responsible for the uniquely American approach to religious freedom. At the same time, he gives due credit to John Leland, the Baptist preacher who profoundly influenced both Madison and Thomas Jefferson.

Even so, Waldman notes a disturbing tendency among faith groups to forget their own history. Baptists—beaten and jailed in the

1700s—sometimes joined in virulent anti-Catholic rhetoric in the 1800s that fueled riots. As Catholics grew in number and gained political clout, they often began to demand government support for their parochial schools. Some Mormons—whose forebears were massacred by mobs, attacked by the U.S. Army and denied protection by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 19th century—joined many Catholics and conservative evangelicals in the late 20th and early 21st century in forming the Religious Right. And segments of the Religious Right have demonized and scapegoated American Muslims.

Waldman calls for a sense of perspective. Conservative Christians feel a genuine sense of vulnerability due to a loss of privilege, but they rarely are victimized—certainly not to the degree some politicians and media pundits assert. Waldman specifically challenges evangelical Christians to reclaim moral leadership by defending the rights of unpopular religious minorities and condemning religious bigotry. He also urges continued vigilance. “In the future,” he writes, “the world can benefit from what America has learned, if we manage not to forget it ourselves.”

Ken Camp, managing editor

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