

Freedom of Religion by Individual Choice: The Religious Beliefs and Convictions of Our Founding Fathers

Sarah Carpenter-Vascik

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Sarah Carpenter-Vascik's *Freedom of Religion by Individual Choice* is a well-researched, thoughtful exploration of Americans' First Amendment religious rights that feels especially relevant in the current antifreedom political climate.

America, pivoting from its first colonizers' narrowly held Puritan beliefs, declared itself a free nation in the late 1700s. The inherent conflict of religious freedom is twofold, the book argues. Religious choice can't be restricted by the government, but it also shouldn't be limited by other people's conceptions of god. The fight to preserve religious freedom is as old as our nation itself.

Individual choice is protected by the letter of the law but not always upheld in its spirit, the book argues: "While we are free to observe our religion, we are not free to force others to observe one set of religious beliefs just because a segment of society holds them to be correct, authentic or true." Enabling worship without fear of government interference is the crux of the book, which dives into historic texts and writings from Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, James Madison, and ministers and advocates like Cyrus Grosvenor. The selected texts skew male, white, and propertied, which merits a conversation of its own: Why do we assume the government is agnostic? With no indigenous voices and little input by women, the book examines the ruling class's long-running debate about freedom of faith.

This survey of influential writers and thinkers is both valuable and humane. However, the book shies away from hard criticism of problematic historic figures, or from putting them into context. For example, Andrew Jackson, who is responsible for the genocide of Native American people and has been resurrected as a moral entity by the Trump administration, is described as "a staunch defender of the separation of church and state ... [who] preached religious tolerance to them as long as they embraced some form of Christianity." Indigenous spirituality and humanity are overlooked; Jackson is interpreted on his own terms.

Freedom of Religion is well written, with a style that is informed without being inaccessible or overly academic. Although Carpenter-Vascik's presence in the book is minimal, her personal experience is woven throughout, usually as an explanation for the lens of interpretation of the included primary texts. Overall, the tone is conversational, smart, and provocative.

With its faithfully transcribed collection of primary texts, *Freedom of Religion* is a valuable addition to the debate on religious freedom that feels extremely timely in an age of constitutional repression.

CLAIRE FOSTER (November 14, 2018)

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