

Book Review

Religious Freedom in a Secular Age: A Christian Case for Liberty, Equality, and Secular Government

Religious Freedom in a Secular Age: A Christian Case for Liberty, Equality, and Secular Government. By Michael F Bird. Zondervan, 2022. Pp. 187. ISBN: 9780310538882.

Review by Jacob Carson*

Fired footy stars, Christian bakers on trial, and churches facing closure over Covid whilst casinos remain open. This is the socio-political situation met head on by Michael F Bird in his well-researched, witty, and culturally perceptive book *Religious Freedom in a Secular Age: A Christian Case for Liberty, Equality, and Secular Government*.¹ Perhaps best known for his collaborations with NT Wright,² Bird brings his unique theological expertise to the legally fraught topic of religious freedom in the West. As the subtitle suggests, Bird writes from an explicitly Christian perspective; however, readers of all stripes based in Australia, America, or the UK will still find benefit in Bird's multi-faceted analysis. The central argument of the book is two-fold. First, on a political level, Bird argues in favour of secular governments championing 'confident pluralism' — a libertarian approach that guarantees freedoms to people of all faiths and sexualities to the maximum extent possible.³ Second, on a personal level, Bird argues that Christians ought to confront the rising tide of anti-religious sentiment by joining him in defending confident pluralism and the social desirability of religion and by serving broader society in Christian love.

Structurally, *Religious Freedom in a Secular Age* follows a tripartite development. Part 1 provides a historical overview of how Western society first adopted a benign secularism following the Reformation, in which governments exhibited *neutrality* towards religion, before explaining how this then morphed into the militant secularism of today, in which governments increasingly exhibit *hostility* towards religion. Having provided the relevant background to the current threat to religious freedom, Bird then advances his 'live and let live' policy solution of confident pluralism in part 2, which equally affirms LGBTQI+ rights and religious rights, 'letting the gays be gay, letting the Christians be Christian, and letting the Muslims be Muslim'.⁴ He defines this position against the extremes of Christian nationalism and progressive authoritarianism, before closing the section by addressing two common objections to religious freedom: that it is not absolute, and that it should be construed narrowly as mere freedom of worship. Bird concedes that the former objection is generally true, but rejoins that this argument is often weaponised against religious freedom in defence of such 'pseudo-rights' as the right not to be offended.⁵ To the latter objection, Bird points out how a myopic focus on

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¹ Michael F Bird, *Religious Freedom in a Secular Age: A Christian Case for Liberty, Equality, and Secular Government* (Zondervan, 2022).

² See, eg, NT Wright and Michael F Bird, *The New Testament in Its World* (Zondervan Academic, 2019).

³ This is a direct rehash of the policy solution proposed in John Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁴ Bird (n 1) 77.

⁵ Ibid 102–106.

freedom of worship fails to recognise the fact that faith shapes every activity in a believer's life — not just the hour or so they spend in church on a Sunday.⁶ In part 3, Bird concludes his argument by promoting the 'Thessalonian strategy' as his preferred model for Christian engagement with secular culture. According to this strategy, Christians should advocate for the 'confident pluralism' policy of part 2, whilst 'turning the world upside down'⁷ by providing the world with 'an alternative community of freedom and love'.⁸ As his final, related point, Bird underscores the need for Christians to engage in apologetics⁹ in order to defend the place of faith in society, since '[r]eligious freedom will be credible only if religion is regarded as credible'.¹⁰

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given Bird's status as a leading theologian and public intellectual, the real value of *Religious Freedom in a Secular Age* lies in the cultural and theological acumen that fills its pages. This can be seen in Bird's impressive ability to put his finger right on the pulse of modern Western culture and articulately diagnose the unspoken contempt with which faith is often treated in contemporary dialogue. For instance, Bird memorably compares religion to 'intellectual pornography' in that it gets treated as 'a dirty and disgusting thing that people should be allowed to do only in the privacy of their own homes or in the seclusion of houses of worship'.¹¹ Elsewhere, he points out that religious liberty tends to get 'equated with freedom for bigotry' and hence stands only as 'a begrudging exemption' in the statute books, rather than being valued as 'an intrinsic good in a pluralistic society'.¹² Further playing to Bird's strengths, the applied theology of part 3 as a whole is a clear stand-out in the book that can be commended without reservation. In particular, the deeply practical tactics that Bird recommends as part of the 'Thessalonian strategy' are arguably the best part of the book.¹³ Specific strategies for Christians that merit attention include uniting together with other denominations and faith communities on common goals, refusing to succumb to the pressure to vacate the public square, and practising love of enemies within political debate.

These virtues noted, not all readers will find Bird's policy presentation faultless. Throughout the book, Bird betrays his Australian Anglican disposition through his constant attempts at fending off an association with political conservatism that is realistically inevitable. For example, Bird suggests that Christian nationalism, which he describes as a form of 'civil religion' that threatens pluralism,¹⁴ is just as much of a threat to religious freedom in mainstream politics as militant secularism is.¹⁵ Granted, there *is* a Christian nationalist undertone to Trump's Bible-swinging showmanship to win the evangelical vote in the US. However, at least in Australia, Christian nationalist policy simply does not have ascendancy in any mainstream party in the same way that hostile secularism has recently gripped, for example, the Victorian Labor Party.¹⁶ Indeed, it is difficult to see the Christian nationalist threat

⁶ Ibid 106–113.

⁷ See Acts 17:1–9 (NRSV).

⁸ Bird (n 1) 129.

⁹ Ibid 149. Apologetics is 'the reasoned defence of the Christian faith'.

¹⁰ Ibid 166.

¹¹ Ibid 42. For example, this attitude is reflected in the ban on school students and government employees wearing religious symbols in France and Quebec respectively.

¹² Ibid 53. This was seen, for instance, in the recent debate over the Religious Discrimination Bill 2021 (Cth).

¹³ Ibid 131–146.

¹⁴ Ibid 80–81.

¹⁵ Ibid ch 4.

¹⁶ See, eg, the prohibition on prayer in Labor's *Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Act 2021* (Vic) s 5(3)(b), and the substantial restriction on the right of religious bodies to hire in accordance with their beliefs in Labor's *Equal Opportunity (Religious Exceptions) Amendment Act 2021* (Vic).

in our two most recent centre-right Prime Ministers who, respectively, legalised same-sex marriage and attempted to pass a Bill that would have guaranteed religious freedom for *all* in Australia.

On the other hand, there are real compromises Bird makes in particular areas that some religious conservatives may find controversial. One notable example is Bird's suggestion that the state should instal an 'LGBTQI+ counselor/advocate' in all religious schools — a position that opens a backdoor for activists who may wish to subtly undermine a religious ethos that they do not believe in.¹⁷ Additionally, Bird has minimal interest in preserving the Christian heritage of Australia's politico-legal system in its moral or symbolic aspects (eg, prayers before Parliament), being satisfied instead with maintaining the autonomy of Christians as a minority group within Australian society.¹⁸

However, the value of Bird's balancing act is its real viability as a solution to one particularly aggressive front of the culture war. Whether either side likes it or not, tolerant accommodation appears to be the only peaceful way forward that recognises the reality that neither traditional religious conservatism nor post-1960s sexual progressivism appear to be going anywhere any time soon. Bird sums this up well when he describes his suggestion as 'a settlement in which not everyone gets what they want but gets what they need to live at peace with each other'¹⁹ — an outcome that, from a biblical point-of-view, Christians ought to embrace.²⁰

Overall, *Religious Freedom in a Secular Age* is a welcome contribution to the debate on religious freedom that is raging through Western parliaments and courts, from a theological voice with real skin in the game. Backed by pertinent insight and pragmatic reflection, Bird is likely to challenge readers from both sides of the political aisle with his 'golden mean' approach to policy, making this an important read for both liberals and conservatives, believers and non-believers alike. However, as nuanced as the book may be in its presentation, the message it ultimately sends remains both clear and grave: on this issue, the alternatives boil down to 'whether one prizes freedom *of* religion or freedom *from* religion'.²¹

¹⁷ Bird (n 1) 75.

¹⁸ See, eg, *ibid* 80–81, 117–118.

¹⁹ *Ibid* 77.

²⁰ See, eg, Romans 12:18 (NRSV).

²¹ Bird (n 1) 10 (emphasis added).