

theological enterprise, but its constant resource and critic, as well as its final arbiter? Conversely, to the extent to which one is committed to the doctrine of Scripture as God’s inspired word and authoritative revelation, should not the biblical scholar expect a coherence and harmony to characterize Scripture, not merely in its overall message but also, to a large degree, in its discreet elements? In principle, the intended reader of the two books would answer both questions affirmatively, but there is a genuine tension between biblical and systematic disciplines in the way these questions come to bear on specific texts and specific doctrines.

As McKnight rightly emphasizes, each approach should inform the other. One cannot simply bracket off the “system” when doing exegesis. However, any theological enterprise taking its cue from *sola Scriptura*—as well as from the perspective of *semper reformanda*—must commit itself to a responsible, rigorous, and contextually sensitive understanding of the text. This could be seen as trying to fit a square peg into a round hole; however, a constant interplay between the two is the only means of avoiding a logical, as well as practical, conundrum: exegesis operates within the provisional bounds of the church’s teachings—which must themselves then be questioned and confirmed or, in some cases, revised in light of a more precise understanding of Scripture. Although this could seem unsettling from a confessional viewpoint, it is the only way of truly respecting the primacy of *sola Scriptura* and avoiding doctrinal stagnation. The great merit of McKnight’s and Boersma’s conversation is to highlight this truth and the ongoing interplay of both disciplines.

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Robert L. Wilken. *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

The Presbyterian Church in America, like many Presbyterian and Reformed denominations, lays out in its Book of Church Order the fundamental preliminary principle that “God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from any doctrines or commandments of men (a) which are in any respect contrary to the Word of God, or (b) which in regard to matters of

faith and worship are not governed by the Word of God.”⁶ The liberty of conscience functions and is delimited by the penumbra of biblical orthodoxy in tandem with the declarative power of the church in faithful persuasive preaching and the conscience of the individual so persuaded. It is a more precise way of stating the words attributed to Luther at the imperial Diet of Worms (1521) that his conscience was bound to the word of God. This preliminary principle does not authorize or endorse a coercive power for the church and also holds as basic that the church is a voluntary society.

Thus, the claim that Robert Wilken advances and defends in his essay that religious freedom is a fundamental human right is welcome. Wilken maintains that religious freedom’s “origins are not political but religious, and its history [is] a tale of inwardness, of spiritual freedom, and of obeisance aimed upward” (2). The three themes around which the book orbits are first, “religious belief is an inner conviction accountable to God alone and resistant to compulsion”; second, “conscience is a form of spiritual knowledge that carries an obligation to act”; and third, “human society is governed by two powers” (4). The author does not claim to offer a thorough treatment of these topics, but he presents a historical essay on the liberty of conscience as a natural right that belongs to all human beings (5). Thus, it is a relatively short popular treatment on a complex topic of religious liberty spread over two thousand years of church history in nine chapters and an appendix, all in 191 pages. It is a comfortable read and flows quickly through a historical narrative. A close reader inclined to evaluate endnotes may occasionally find the scholarly avenues and assumptions undergirding the author’s arguments, but the bibliography is self-consciously incomplete, selective, and not entirely helpful for an inquisitive reader. This essay will certainly introduce issues to the uninitiated and continue conversations with the initiated. It would best fit as an ancillary reading for an undergraduate elective course.

The first chapter is, in this reviewer’s opinion, the strongest, given Wilken’s longstanding expertise and well-documented brilliance as a virtuoso in patristic studies, especially on Christian arguments for religious toleration to pagan Roman authorities. This chapter harkens back to Wilken’s *Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (1984) and sings; it is worth the price of the book. Wilken’s subject expertise and insight shines, especially in the realm of patristic discussions of Tertullian and Lactantius.

The contents of chapters 2 through 5 are best supplemented by works from other authors for more detail: Roland Bainton, Herbert Butterfield,

⁶ Presbyterian Church in America, *Book of Church Order* (Atlanta: Committee on Discipleship Ministries, 2022), Preface, II.1, <https://www.pcaac.org/bco/>; cf. Westminster Confession of Faith 20.2.

Brian Tierney, Oliver O'Donovan, and John Witte, to name a few. Somewhere between the medieval chapter two and the early modern chapter three, we have lost the significance of the Albigensian crusades, the stories of the Waldensian persecutions, the Hussite Wars, and the Peasant War of 1524–1525, which resulted in upwards of a hundred thousand deaths. An economic evaluation of the Peasant War, backed by Martin Luther, might focus on the status of the peasants in the balance of power, but the religious liberty evaluation could have focused on the role of, for example, the Anabaptist clergy in the German Peasant War. What the essay does highlight in these chapters are striking cases of historical figures invoking liberty of conscience in the midst of confessionalized states, which is a helpful contribution consolidating insights from secondary sources. Perhaps a word of encouragement would be helpful here.

A significant legal point that might amplify the changes from the medieval to the modern stance toward religious liberty was the status of heretics. In *Vergentis in Senium* (1199), Innocent III equated heresy with the *crimen laesae majestatis* (offense against the ruler). Such an equation transposed all the criminal punishments corporal and capital associated with treason against a human king onto a heretic as a traitor to God. Besides forming the basis for the use of torture in doctrinal inquisitions, this medieval legal doctrine is informative about how to work with the early modern framework of questions regarding liberty of conscience and the free exercise of religion. Such a legal framework dealt with heretics as both direct enemies of the church and indirect enemies of the state. European nations in this period, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, inherited the assumptions of canon and civil law regarding treason and heresy. Thus, while religious liberty may not originate in political and judicial theory, it was commonly worked out in courtrooms and high-stakes trials regarding the role of the state as a guardian and wall for the church. The variety of ways early modern city-states, territories, and realms handled such issues is beyond the capacity of the reviewed essay and this review, but the issue bears further study. The religious liberty of the individual is always juxtaposed against the tolerance and coerciveness of the political and legal majority. It is not simply a question of the polite disagreement of neighbors but represents an intentional choice and value of a culture and its legal system to honor the rights represented in the doctrine of religious liberty.

Chapter 6 contributes to our understanding of John Owen and William Penn and popularizes some of A. R. Murphy's work on Penn. The discussion of John Locke is one of the bookends for the essay. This is another place where the book is at its best. The turbulent days of the English Civil Wars

are vividly and helpfully summarized with reference to the plight of the separatists and independents. One wonders, however, why the book does not address the arguments by the likes of Baruch Spinoza or Thomas Hobbes, as both of these figures would have fit nicely into the narratives of the Dutch and British contexts, respectively, as divergent voices on the same topic.

The reader could benefit from reading Wilken together with Roland Bainton's *The Travail of Religious Society* (1951) as a baseline for Wilken's trajectory. Wilken's arguments, in the main, track with Bainton's. Bainton's cast of characters limping toward liberty also includes the villain John Calvin (whom Bainton pairs with Tomás de Torquemada) and the heroes Michael Servetus, Sebastien Castellion, Roger Williams, and John Locke. The problem of the significance of heterodoxy as a legal issue in Christian history is not an axis of analysis that colors either work. Locke and Thomas Jefferson might be known for their religious liberty, but equally troubling were their liberties with orthodox Christianity.

Every generation and every context have parameters of social acceptability. And when Christianity functions in its strongest witness, as Christ's words in John 15:18–25 indicate, faithful Christians will be persecuted not for wrongdoing but for orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Wilken's contribution certainly amplifies the importance of religious liberty and its origins, but it does not grapple with the modern reality that nations like the United States of America increasingly view orthodox Christianity and its lifestyle as a form of intolerance and hate. If the origins of religious liberty are, in fact, religious, and not political, does this jeopardize its status in a secular society? If religious liberty is a religious doctrine, what is its status in a society that neither accepts natural law nor tolerates religious influence? This is why chapter one in this essay on the Christian patristic witness and persecution is so very relevant: contemporary secularists, in a way not too dissimilar from those of the pious pagan Romans, frequently view Christians as immoral, antisocial, and superstitious. The veneer of social respectability of Christianity is gone in the upper echelons of academia and politics in Europe and North America, historically bastions of liberty of conscience and religious liberty. But more than the cultural implications are the judicial: whereas prior generations of Americans viewed First Amendment rights—including religious freedom—as inalienable and nonnegotiable, more and more judicial rulings restrict religious liberty and the claims of conscience. Corporations in Europe and the United States in the last five years have found increasing judicial support for prohibiting even the display of religious symbols in the workplace, such as wearing a cross or a star of David. Who is not aware of the French government's restrictions on religious dress? If

religious jewelry and clothing are unacceptable in the workplace and in public, how much more religious speech? What is the status of Christians, their religious liberty, and the free exercise of religion when a society increasingly identifies as spiritual, not religious? When a policy of religious neutrality in the workforce translates into active intolerance and economic persecution, discussions of religious liberty are all the more necessary, relevant, and vital. And thus the importance of this work.

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