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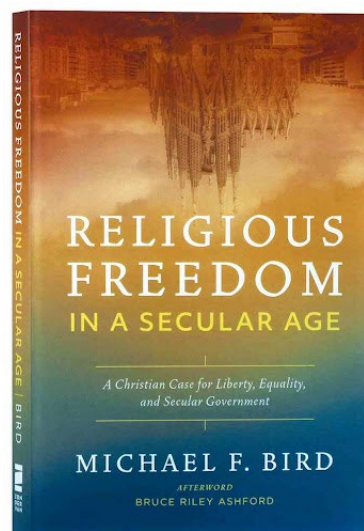
Religious Freedom in a Secular Age: A Christian Case for Liberty, Equality and Secular Government

Michael F. Bird (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022)

REVIEWED BY ANDREW KIRK

There can be little doubt that freedom to commit oneself openly and peacefully to religious beliefs and practices, attained over many years through much suffering, is now under increasing threat. This reality, surprisingly, is no longer confined to authoritarian regimes, such as China, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, but is now arising in nations that boast their allegiance to universal human rights principles codified in International Declarations, Covenants and Conventions. These rights have been clearly set out in Articles 18, 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948. Subsequently they were clarified and endorsed by further Covenants, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966).

Michael Bird's book takes up the case for a specifically Christian approach to safeguarding this freedom in the



light of new laws, promulgated in the USA, Canada, Australia, the UK, and several European nations that have either already curtailed this freedom, are threatening to do so, or are bringing criminal cases against individuals accused of abusing this freedom. The problem, which he examines, is that there has arisen within Western nations in the last half century an increasingly potent philosophical and political theory that has created a militant secularist ideology that aims to influence, or better control, government policies.

Behind the ideology is the desire to enforce cultural change within all spheres of civil, commercial and private life. The aspiration is that the state becomes wedded to a narrowly sectarian ideology designed to enforce particular dogmas and punish dissenters. Religion is portrayed as the main enemy of this "civic totalitarianism." According to campaigning groups, governments have a duty to bring religion into alignment with a certain "progressive" view of equality, diversity,

non-discrimination, inclusion, “hate-speech” and bigotry. Religion is deemed culpable of ascribing ultimacy to something other than the state and its vision of what is good, offering a competing social viewpoint and an alternative morality.

The book is set out to argue for a true understanding of the responsibilities of an authentically secular state, to dismantle the arguments for limiting religious freedom, to present a strategy that maintains a Christian witness in a post-Christian society, and to encourage Christians prophetically to speak truth to power. All this is designed to pursue an open social policy in the area of human rights, where present conflicts seem to be unresolvable, that will guarantee mutual equality and accommodation between different moral convictions.



Stanisław Ignacy Witkacy, *General Confusion*

The first chapter seeks to understand the significance and implications of a secular state. The author maintains that Western nations are not, strictly speaking, secular countries; rather, they are pluralistic communities with strong Christian heritages, but now acting as secular governments. Secularism, as a system of belief, does not champion the removal of religion from the public square, but the separation of powers between church and state and a guarantor of the freedom of conscience. When acting in good faith, it protects religions rather than excluding them from democratic public discourse. It presents itself as a neutral space for dialogue and tolerance. Secularism was created to enable religion to

be protected from interference by the state and the state from becoming a secular “theocracy.”

Some will query his use of the term secularism to define what others would prefer to call the process of secularisation. Bird admits that secularism has, since the millennium, increasingly become a militant ideology that demands that governments be given the power to control the beliefs of citizens by law. At its most liberal, it would confine religious beliefs and actions to private spaces as a preferred pastime. At its most illiberal, as in the case of legislation banning “conversion-therapy,” not even privacy is excluded from constraint.

The second chapter concentrates on this second characteristic of secularism, its aggressive programme. Church and state may be separated in terms of executive power, but if religion is to be free to share its beliefs about how we should live it must be accorded the right, where necessary, to hold public power to account. If religion is to be confined to the private enchantments of a dwindling minority, a huge ethical and spiritual vacuum is created at the heart of society. As human beings generally abhor a vacuum, the gap is filled by a state-sponsored ideology, enforced by legal means.

So, Bird’s originally vaunted secularism is now menacing “the openness and freedom secularisation has produced.” It is producing what Andrew Walker, using a neologism, calls “Seculocracy,” i.e., “the effort to eliminate or reduce religion’s influence in culture.” Religious individuals and institutions are threatened with punishment for having the wrong beliefs. They are being constrained to fit with the prejudices and policies of certain political actors, largely driven by the social and moral repercussions of critical theory and the modern self (Charles Taylor): “truth means nothing more than what benefits the tribe” (or the individual).

The third chapter takes up the issue of the 21st century’s “culture wars,” where the conflict between gay rights and religious freedom forms the forward edge of the battle area. Bird heroically engages with an undertaking that many people think is a lost cause: how to uphold the freedoms of both parties in an equitable way. The desired goal, he maintains, is that gay rights and religious liberty are equally affirmed, without subjecting sexual minorities to unfair discrimination or shrinking religious freedoms.

As an Australian, who lives in Melbourne, he turns inevitably to the Victorian State’s recently enacted legislation of the Conversion Practices Bill. Apparently, the

State government has declared that “they will prosecute, based on private conversations with someone over coffee, if a person says that Christian life entails celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage.” “The Victorian government has now fashioned the legal weapons to prosecute people of faith over certain prayers or for their specific view of family, marriage and sexuality, if it so wishes.”

It is surely ingenuous to believe that an open society can be preserved, when governments are persuaded by contentious pressure groups to restrict religious liberty in such a drastic way. As Bird himself states, the State is not competent to adjudicate matters of religion. If it sets itself up as an authority on religious truth, secularism (as he defines it) is over. Freedom of religion, to be authentic, implies freedom of association and to maintain the integrity of its religious ethos. So, “religious associations must be impregnable to external compulsion in such a way that would be injurious to their identities or missions.”

This discussion leads him in chapter 4 to see how it might be possible, against the present cultural trend, to implement what he calls a “confident pluralism whereby personal freedoms for everyone are protected, tolerance and accommodation are promoted and the principle of fair play for everyone is considered normal.” In the light of the previous discussion of the creeping “civic totalitarianism,” the kind of open, pluralistic society that Bird advocates appears at first sight a forlorn hope.

One of the problems that Bird does not properly address is the question of when personal freedoms are rightly limited. Moral codes exist such as the forbidding of any form of paedophilia, access to pornography for young people, possession of toxic drugs, the promotion of gambling to people already held captive to its seductive appeal. The rule of thumb on the prohibition of certain practices is the destructive effect they have both on the people involved in them and on others whom they influence.

In Bird's concept of “confident pluralism,” where people's “expressive liberty” is defined as “a presumption in favour

of individuals and groups living their lives as they see fit and according to their own understanding of what gives life meaning and value,” not everything should be permitted. The consequences of some people's choices “to be, think and live differently” do in fact promote the opposite of possessing an integrated and healthy personality. By dint of carrying out their preferences, they

become an unnecessary burden on society.

The common mantra in favour of non-discrimination that “everyone has the right to be who they are” raises the profound question of what are the indicators that demonstrate human life existing at its most satisfactory. I imagine that on the answer to this question Christians and secular humanists do not accept they exist on a level playing field. At the root of the problem of religious freedom in a secular age, as outlined by Bird, is the fact that on this fundamental issue there is an unresolvable tension between incompatible belief systems.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Darkness*

In a subsequent chapter, Bird considers “How then should we live?” as Christians in a post-Christian world. He looks at several alternative possibilities: identify oneself as a Christian in exile; create new monastic communities in the midst of an approaching new “dark age”; adopt the practice of being a “faithful, distinct presence” in the midst of an inhospitable world, foregoing the temptation to urge changes in public policy that conform to the Christian view of social righteousness, but create communities that remain within the world but are not of it. Finally, Bird advocates what he calls the Thessalonian strategy. It is a way of turning the world upside down (Acts 17:7, 13) by counteracting the present intolerant attitude to all who wish to practise their particular faith unhindered by fanatical programmes of condemnation, censure and contempt.

Personally, I find this chapter somewhat confusing. In each of the options Bird mentions, he wonders “where the place is for the angry prophet.” And yet, he seems to exalt the current hallmark of love (“love is love”) as the ready acceptance of people's inclination to believe whatever they wish to believe, however that may contradict God's plan for the best way to be human. One does not, for

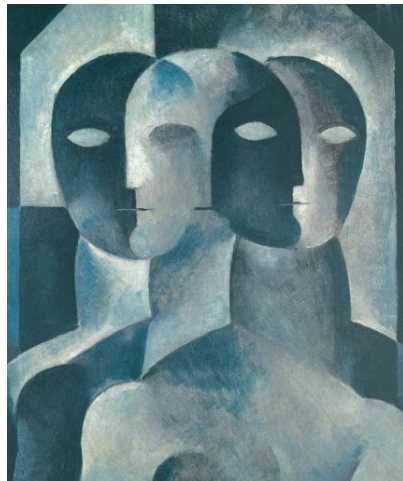
example, show love to a young person confused about their sexual identity by recommending they undergo irreversible treatment to change their gender. A truly loving response to their gender dysphoria is to help them to unravel the deep causes of their present uneasiness and accept willingly the gift of the sex they were born with.

In his final chapter, Bird outlines Christians' calling to explain and defend their faith whenever opportunity arises.

Apologetics he rightly insists is a necessary element of discipleship, part of worship and the growth in holiness. He mounts a vigorous defence against the notion that religious faith is just bad, for in its truest form it provides a healthy community, true belief, positive ritual, a fulfilling mission in life, a soundly based ethics and accountability. He might have emphasised more pro-actively that apologetics is not just about defending the Christian faith, but also about exposing the falsehood of contrary beliefs, because they lack a solid foundation in rational understanding, experience, wisdom and common sense.

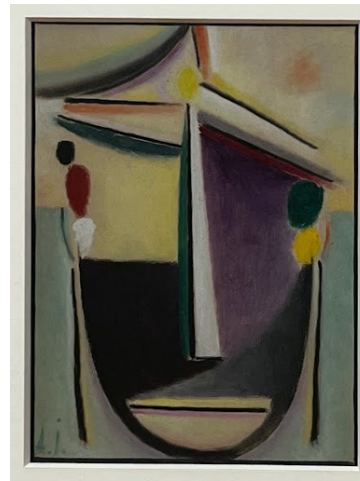
The final part of the book is written as an "Afterword" by Bruce Ashford. He expounds and amplifies the argument put forward by Philip Rieff, a Jewish sociologist, that the West in general "is in the midst of an unprecedented project to desacrilize the social order." A sacred order has always undergirded social order by providing a world of meaning, a code of conduct and by shaping cultural institutions, which in turn shape society. In the West, Christian monotheism has been chosen as the sacred order that has provided a powerful means of opposing social and cultural decadence.

He goes on to say that "many of this era's cultural elite seek to undo all of this. They ... repudiate the vertical in favour of constructing identity horizontally from below." "The casualties have been heavy ... included among them are the notion of truth, the institution of marriage, and the definition of male and female." "Atop the list ..., Michael Bird places religious liberty."



Ismael Nery, *We*

By attempting to squeeze out religious freedom, "social progressives ... undermine their own agenda by subverting social diversity and cultural pluralism"; in other words, by eliminating in practice their own much vaunted virtue of inclusion. In the face of the seditious



Alexej von Jawlensky, *Abstract Head, Black-Yellow-Purple*

policy of working towards silencing core Christian beliefs and action being hoisted onto Western societies Ashford calls for Christians to be prophetic, "declaring that Jesus is Lord and confronting the *cultus publicus* of Western empire. This will require both sacrifice and humble confidence. The day

will come when "Jesus will ... expose the 'self-aggrandizing pseudo-deity of imperial power ... as an idolatrous fraud'."

The book as a whole argues powerfully for the reinforcement of religious liberty, in terms manifested in international declarations, covenants and human rights legislation. It is underpinned by grappling with the huge philosophical, cultural shift in the West that has taken root in the last 60 years, or so. There are however, in my opinion, one or two defects that weaken the general presentation: a certain naivety, historically-speaking, about the intention and power of secularism; the inclusion of all religions and certain expressions of Christian faith as though, somehow, they had a common thread running through them, and the lack of a sustained discussion of the origin, explanation and application of human rights, with the rhetoric removed. Nevertheless, the general tenor of this presentation of a Christian case for religious freedom in a secular age and liberty, equality and secular government is worthy of much reflection. The time of its publication is propitious as the *kairos* indicates that religious freedom as a core element of a healthy civilisation is under a forceful, concerted threat.

Andrew Kirk has degrees from London, Cambridge and Nijmegen (Netherlands) Universities. He has spent most of his adult life in theological education in Latin America and the UK. Since retirement in 2002, he has been involved with missiological institutions in the UK, Prague, Amsterdam and Budapest. Andrew is the author of many books, the latest of which, A Tale of Two Worlds: Why Contemporary Western Culture Contends against the Christian Faith, is due to be published in 2023.