

## Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom

**Robert Louis Wilken**

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Given that religious freedom is likely to be one of the most hotly contested issues in the next decade, knowledge of its origins and history is going to be vital for any who wish to think responsibly about the matter. Given this, Robert Louis Wilken's *Liberty in the Things of God* is both an important and helpful contribution to the literature on this topic. Learned, thoughtful, and as with all Wilken's books, beautifully written, it should be a key text for anyone wishing to be more informed on the topic.

Wilken sets his narrative against the more traditional understanding of the development of religious freedom as an Enlightenment novelty. Working from Lactantius and Tertullian to John Locke (and, in an appendix, Thomas Jefferson), Wilken argues that religious freedom was not the result of an increasing indifference to religious dogma but rather the implication of the Christian notion that religion, as a matter of conscience, could not be coerced, combined with the need for the state to find some means of accommodating the religious diversity that was triggered by the Reformation. Along the way, he discusses the religious settlements in Reformation Germany, Switzerland, France, and the Netherlands. He also devotes significant attention to England where an established Anglicanism led to the twofold problem of recusant Roman Catholics and nonconforming or even separatist Protestants and sects such as the Quakers. In so doing, he makes it clear that the modern notion of liberty (and not merely tolerance, a much weaker concept) is intimately connected in the West to the history of Christianity.

Of course, in this regard religion is not without its ambiguities. While conscience may well be a Christian concept that lies at the heart of the issue, Christianity has proved a remarkably effective idiom for the suppression of freedom, a point that Wilken makes on a number of occasions. It is useful to be reminded that Thomas More, often heralded as a hero of conscience—an image canonized via Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for All Seasons*—was himself involved in the prosecution of Protestants as heretics. The lesson here is that we are all denizens of context and shaped in ways by that context which might well make us seem inconsistent to a later age which seeks eagerly to find that its own pieties have been passed on in pristine condition from heroes of the past. Wilken is neither hagiographer nor iconoclast and the narrative he presents makes it clear that the path to the First Amendment is Christian in origin, as (paradoxically) are the problems which made the First Amendment necessary.

When it comes to applying Wilken's narrative to the present, a number of observations suggest themselves. First, the era of Tertullian and Lactantius was one where the church was deprived of religious liberty because its behavior (rooted in its beliefs) was seen to be subversive of Roman civil order. The church looked like a secret society which seemed sinister in an era when even fire brigades could be considered seditious. Combined with confused yet sensational rumors of incest and cannibalism, and occasionally exploding

into public life through the refusal of Christians to engage in the imperial cult, it is clear that perceived immoral (and therefore socially dangerous) behavior was that which provoked persecution.

This raises an important point which Wilken does not address: Religious liberty has never been an absolute and unconditioned right. Take, for example, the issue of Mormonism in nineteenth-century America. The Mormons suffered because of their teaching on plural marriage. It was not so much that they believed it. It was that they practiced it and paid the legal and social penalties for so doing. This indicates that religious liberty is a concept whose practical application is still shaped by broader cultural tastes and commitments. This underlies Wilken's narrative but is not as explicit a point as it could have been.

This in turn raises a question of the implications of Wilken's narrative in this present age. It may well be the case that liberty has its origins in Christianity, with its development of the notion of conscience and free will. But the kind of society where religious freedom worked well was, as Wilken demonstrates, the kind of society where there was a broad consensus among those tolerated religions (at first, Protestant sects and then, later, Roman Catholicism and Judaism) on what was acceptable social behavior. It worked well, in other words, in societies where a basic Judeo-Christian morality held sway. Where that is not the case, religious liberty is not seen as a virtue.

And that is where we are today. The big question is not whether religious liberty is rooted in Enlightenment principles or Christian theology. It is whether religious liberty serves the common good. And now that the common good is increasingly defined by behaviors that are anathema to traditional Christianity, from no-fault divorce to gay marriage to identities structured around psychological categories and sexual desires, the future for religious liberty looks bleak. This perhaps means that the most important chapter in Wilken's book is the first, showing as it does that the church has been here before (in the second century) and yet is still here today, nearly 1900 years later.

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