

Book Reviews

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

Michael E. Bird

Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022. 224 pp., ISBN: 978-0319358882, US \$13.29

The role and place of religion in the public sphere have been under intense scrutiny over the last decade or more. Author Michael F. Bird's home nation of Australia is no exception. This has been a surprise for many, as Australia is a place where religion has been thought of as a "whisper in the mind and a shy hope in the heart."¹ As Maddox has observed "Australians [have] tended to be suspicious of too-overt religiosity, shying away, for example, from American-style civil religion and avoiding anything resembling 'God bless America' political rhetoric."² However, given the ongoing, divisive public debates since Australia's infamous plebiscite on same-sex marriage in 2017,³ it is not surprising to see Australian authors delve into the question of the future of religious freedom in a secular age.

This book has two important features. First, the author draws many of the examples from his own country. This may feel lopsided, given Australia's relative size and international importance, if Bird's nationality is not taken into account. However, relevant case law from the USA is discussed at length in Part II and much of Part III also focuses on the USA. But to understand the book, Australia's unique human rights framework, with no national bill or charter of rights, must also be kept in mind.⁴ International readers may wonder why some of the examples are not simply resolved by reference to a bill or charter of rights; the answer is that Australia has no such document or mechanism.

Second, the author is an Anglican priest, something he refers to numerous times in the text. The book is written from an unashamedly Christian perspective. The text is peppered with references to Christian history, doctrine and examples, including biblical passages, and Part III examines Christian apologetics. This is not to say the text is unapproachable for those outside the Christian faith, and of course, not all Christians would agree with the author's arguments and conclusions. But if you come to this book looking for an atheistic or religion-neutral

1 Gary Bouma, *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

2 Marion Maddox, 'A Secular Cancellation of the Secularist Truce: Religion and Political Legitimation in Australia' in Patrick Michael and Enzo Pace (eds) *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion Volume 2 Religion and Politics* (Brill, 2011), 301.

3 See Renae Barker, *State and Religion: The Australian Story* (Routledge, 2019), 150-153.

4 See Louise Chappell, John Chesterman and Lisa Hill, *The Politics of Human Rights in Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 27-29.

account, you will be disappointed. To fully understand the author's Christian perspective, read the last chapter first.

Part I sets out the author's views and understanding of secularism, Part II examines the concept of freedom of religion and Part III focuses on apologetics.

The argument in Part I rests on a few key points. First, secularism is inherently a good thing for freedom of religion; second, and related to the first point, secularism as properly understood involves the separation of church and state not the removal of religion from the public sphere, and therefore secularism also equals pluralism. Finally, the author argues that secularism is an inherently Christian concept. He argues that secularism cannot exist in Islamic nations as anything more than a transplant or as something grafted on; it cannot be home-grown.

Towards the end of Part I, Bird builds up to the assertion that rising, militant secularism poses a threat to religious freedom. By militant secularism, he means the relegation of religion to a private sphere accompanied by regulation of what the state considers "acceptable" religion.

In Part II, the first of three chapters on freedom of religion focuses on freedom of religion and LGBTQI+ rights, and in particular the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of one's sexuality. One might have hoped for an overview chapter on the wide variety of issues related to freedom of religion before this one on gender and sexuality. In positioning this chapter first, Bird signals that this is the most important issue for freedom of religion in a secular age. I would agree that it is one challenge we need to resolve, but not the only one and perhaps ultimately not the most important one.

In the next chapter, Bird presents three alternative narratives in debates over freedom of religion: Civic Religion: Christian Nationalism, Civic Totalism: Progressive Authoritarianism and Confident Pluralism. Bird criticizes the first two and argues in support of confident pluralism, a position consistent with the view expressed in Part I that secularism equals pluralism. Finally in this part, he discusses two arguments against the narrowing of freedom of religion.

Part III, titled "The Grand Age of Apologetics," is the most obviously Christian aspect of the book, setting out what Bird considers the appropriate Christian response to the secular age and the threats to religious freedom discussed in earlier chapters. He analyses various Christian responses before spending the bulk of the chapter articulating and defending his preferred response, which he calls the Thessalonian strategy. To quote the author "[t]he Thessalonian strategy is about fighting for a Christian pluralism in which we love our neighbors by allowing them to be other than us." It focuses on secularism as pluralism as argued for throughout the book while at the same time asserting a Christian identity and un-

derpinning for plurality. The last chapter of the book is perhaps the most personal, as Bird describes what he views as the way forward for Christian apologetics.

Overall, the book is a useful introduction, from a Christian perspective to secularism and freedom of religion. It is not as comprehensive as one might hope as it is frequently preoccupied with LGBTQI+ issues, but it is an approachable work for a wider (as opposed to purely academic) readership. If you are looking for a balanced Christian perspective on the thorny issues of secularism and freedom of religion, then this book is a great place to start.

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The Jewish Underground of Samarkand: How Faith Defied Soviet Rule – A Memoir and a History

Rabbi Hillel Zaltzman

Simsbury, CT: Mandel Vilar Press, 2023. 424 pp., ISBN 978-1942134923, US \$17.11

Russian religious politics today is looking increasingly like that of the Soviet Union, as highlighted by Tatiana Vagramenko and Francisco Arquerros in their recent *IJRF* article on the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.¹ As memories of life in the Soviet Union are fading or increasingly deemed irrelevant to the contemporary situation, Rabbi Hillel Zaltzman provides an important glimpse into the life of one highly conspicuous minority community under that regime. With antisemitism seeing an abrupt increase globally since the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023, the relevance of his book is unfortunately only greater.

The author belongs to the Chabad-Lubavitch strain of Chassidic (Orthodox) Judaism, the small, pious, and close-knit community whose unusually outreach-oriented approach gives it an outsized visibility and profile. Rabbi Zaltzman begins with a brief history of the community under Czarist Russia and the early Soviet Union. He explains how the Nazi advance in Ukraine forced many adherents, including his parents, to flee to Tashkent and Samarkand in modern-day Uzbekistan, where they benefitted from a surprising degree of freedom during the war and built a thriving community. After World War II, many emigrated to Poland through a brief opening of the border for Polish citizens, leaving behind a small but dedicat-

¹ Tatiana Vagramenko and Francisco Arquerros, "Criminotheology: Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia," *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 16, no. 2 (2023) 83-103, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59484/ZFTB7016>.

ed community to manage religious life in the shadow of Stalin's death camps while most Jews sought to assimilate to life in the officially atheist Soviet Union.

In view of the title, one might expect a comprehensive history of Jewish life under the Soviet regime in this Central Asian city, but Rabbi Zaltzman tempers these expectations, stating that the work is a personal memoir and not intended to be all-encompassing. Nevertheless, a significant part of the book meanders through the partially second-hand stories of prominent Chassidic figures of the early to mid-20th century with whom the author crossed paths during his childhood. This abridged version of an earlier work is billed as "a memoir and a history," but it leaves this reader feeling that neither promise has been fulfilled.

The book is organized in roughly chronological order, with each chapter centered around a specific theme (for example, procuring kosher matzah for Passover or trying to avoid school or work on Shabbat) or person. As a result, each chapter stands more or less on its own, but the chronology suffers. For much of the time period covered, the author was a child or teenager, so his personal experiences are mostly found in the last third of the book, which focuses on his early 20s (the late 1950s and early 1960s). The story of the underground Jewish education system that operated in Samarkand and surrounding areas plays a secondary role to characterizations of Chabad personalities. A couple of close calls notwithstanding, the school system seems to have operated with remarkable ease.

Anecdotes about close encounters with the authorities involve measures necessary to avoid possible KGB agents when picking up an ex-con (released after serving a sentence for alleged involvement in the underground) at the airport; purchasing an airplane ticket to go to Moscow for an exit visa at a time when illegal protests over exit visas were planned in the Soviet capital; being stopped by a police officer and having a suitcase full of contraband searched; and a mysterious KGB search of the author's factory. Along the way, the book also provides something of a manual on how to operate a profit-making enterprise in the communist USSR. Zaltzman alludes to other adventures and perhaps close calls experienced during his travels on behalf of the Chassidic community; more of those stories might have been valuable. On the other hand, some difficulties faced by the community are not immediately obvious, as revealed in the author's and his brother's attempts to find suitable marriage partners.

The book ends with the author's long-sought success in obtaining an exit visa and a glimpse of some of the challenges faced by the Russian immigrant community in Israel when expectations clashed with reality. It seems that materially, the community's life was better in the Soviet Union, but ultimately the longing for spiritual freedom won out over physical hardship.

For readers with a connection to the Chabad community, the stories of prominent personalities will be fascinating. However, a reader interested in freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) may be left wanting to learn more about the day-to-day operations, experiences, and challenges faced by the community, how these were overcome, and details about the threats and kinds of counter-measures necessary. Granted, Uzbekistan, even its urban centres, was somewhat at the periphery of the Soviet Union, so perhaps the regime's grip was not as harsh. But the book leaves the lingering impression that maybe life wasn't so difficult under Soviet control after all. Accordingly, a more comprehensive discussion would have been helpful.

Readers with little or no knowledge of Jewish religious practices may find some portions puzzling, but this does not interfere with the story, nor is it a hindrance for a reader with a basic understanding of Orthodox traditions. The author provides an eight-page glossary to assist those unfamiliar with basic Yiddish and Hebrew terminology, and 16 pages of black-and-white photos bring many of the personalities to life.

Overall, this book is an important contribution to the historical record of FoRB in the Soviet Union, and one is only left wanting more information on this front.

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The gospel and religious freedom: Historical studies in evangelicalism and political engagement

David W. Bebbington, editor

Baylor University Press, Waco. 2023. 230 pp., ISBN 978-1481319300, US \$49.99 (paperback)

Judd Birdsall's afterword helpfully sets this book in context, and I recommend reading it before the substantive chapters. He notes, "*The Gospel and Religious Freedom* is an interesting book that matters precisely because it relentlessly complicates polarized narratives surrounding its subject" (207-208). Indeed, Evangelicals have often oversimplified narratives on religious freedom to gain attention and/or for fundraising purposes.

The book itself is a compilation of papers from a conference at Baylor University in October 2021. The papers are diverse and take very different positions on Evangelical advocacy for religious freedom. The book is divided into two parts; the first half focuses on the US while the second half considers the situation in four other countries.

The articles on the United States cover issues and personalities from before American independence to the Trump era. Nicholas Miller contributes a fascinating analysis of Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island, who in the 1640s invoked Magna Carta to argue for separation of church and state in the colonies. Jeffrey McDonald writes of William Jennings Bryan, a Democrat congressman and three-time nominee for president at the turn of the twentieth century. McDonald documents Bryan's connections to the University of Nebraska that motivated his passion for religious freedom, countering a common narrative that portrays Bryan as uneducated. Todd D. Still considers George W. Truett's speech in Washington, D.C., in May 1920, which set forth the Baptist view of religious liberty. These biographical essays note the importance of individuals and context in the development of religious liberty in the US.

The two articles from the current era are quite critical in their assessment of Evangelical political engagement. Melani McAlister critiques the development of Evangelical awareness of global persecution of Christians and advocacy, which culminated in the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998. McAlister tells this history from the perspective of American evangelicalism. I have personal experience with this history, as I was involved with the global development of a Religious Liberty Commission and the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP) as a Canadian. McAlister describes the IDOP as an event developed in the US to raise awareness of persecution and thereby energize advocacy for the IRFA. On the contrary, it was part of a much larger movement initiated by the World Evangelical Alliance.

Barry Hankins addresses how Evangelicals have lobbied for religious freedom both internationally and in the US during the Trump era. He argues that some Evangelicals now see themselves as a persecuted minority and advocate for religious liberty in order to advance their own self-protection, including discrimination against LGBT persons. He documents the development of Evangelical public-interest law firms and groups them based on whether they advocate for religious liberty for all or just for Evangelicals. Having interacted with several of these organizations in my roles with the Christian Legal Fellowship and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, I agree with his assessment that such organizations have a wide spectrum of approaches. It is challenging to find anyone objective in their analysis in light of the relentless American culture war.

The first chapter in the book's second part, titled "The World," addresses William Wilberforce's promotion of missionary activity to slaves. Wilberforce is well-known for his anti-slavery work, but John Coffey explicates a lesser-known side of his advocacy – on behalf of religious liberty to evangelize slaves in the colonies. The chapter pays some attention to India, but the primary focus is on the Caribbean, where evangelists had more success. It is troubling to see Wilber-

force and Evangelicals depicted as racist colonialists, “sensationalist, reductionist, defamatory” (108). Coffey makes this assessment based on speeches where Wilberforce was denouncing sati (widow burning), the caste system, infanticide, and the juggernaut (where devotees throw themselves under the wheels of the cart carrying the image of the god Krishna). Unquestionably, Wilberforce viewed Christianity as offering a better alternative, though he may have overstated his case. The Indian government itself has not defended these practices and has taken steps to minimize or restrict them.

Similarly, John Maiden paints a very intolerant picture of Evangelical denunciation of Roman Catholics in Britain before Vatican II. He acknowledges some justification for their concerns about a link between Catholicism and totalitarianism, since Mussolini and Franco’s fascism had roots in Roman Catholic countries (139) and high-ranking Nazis were also Roman Catholics (140). But he notes that anti-Catholic discourse continued long after Vatican II. Interestingly, Maiden also notes that Spain and Italy expelled Protestants in the 1950s (138), so intolerance seemed to go both ways. In most countries, Evangelicals and Roman Catholics now at least tolerate one another.

The final three chapters address Nigeria, postwar east-central Europe and China. All these regions have been hot-button areas for religious freedom according to Evangelicals. The chapter on Nigeria, written by Todd M. Thompson, highlights Norman Anderson, an Evangelical lawyer, missionary and expert on Islam who promoted revising sharia law in northern Nigeria, with the support of the UK government. Mary Heimann, author of the chapter on east-central Europe, addresses Evangelical misperceptions that under communism, this region was godless and anti-Christian; in fact, there were many churches and Christians. Wai Luen Kwok describes Allen Yuan, a Chinese house church leader, and Zhu Chengxin, pastor of a Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) church. Commonly, Christian leaders in the TSPM churches were viewed both in China and abroad as having sold out to the communist government. Yet Kwok shows how both these leaders served the church in their differing contexts.

As Birdsall points out in his afterword, narratives are complex. Wilberforce is a hero of Evangelicals yet denigrated Hinduism. Zhu worked strategically within the TSPM to preserve the faith within the small space allowed by the government.

This book may frustrate and anger some Evangelicals as it pushes outside their comfort zones. Yet that is what academic discourse does. None of the authors is dismissive of evangelicalism or its leadership. But they paint realistic portraits, showing dark corners of revered leaders.

Prof Dr Janet Epp Buckingham, Professor Emerita, Trinity Western University and Director, Global Advocacy, World Evangelical Alliance

The Disintegration of the Conscience and the Decline of Modernity

Steven D. Smith

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2023. 275 pp., ISBN 978-0268206918, US \$55.00 (hardback)

Against the backdrop of the development of insights on the conscience (mainly in the US context), Steven D. Smith brings to the fore three major transformations, each reflected in one of three popular historical figures: Thomas More (1478-1535), James Madison (1751-1836) and US Supreme Court Justice William Brennan (1906-1997). Smith observes that, according to More, a person's judgments of conscience should be based on both the mind and the common faith and traditions of Christendom. Over two centuries later, this view of conscience was transformed into a focus on managing a fragmented Christianity, and here Smith points to Madison's influence. Smith then observes that, approximately 150 years after Madison, Brennan played an influential role in propagating a view of conscience that emphasized "being true to yourself" and, coupled with this, the understanding that religion is a private matter.

Smith comments that for More and Madison, conscience was qualified by the authority of God, whilst for Brennan, conscience is grounded in respect for the individual subject. In this regard, conscience played an integral role in dealing with an increasing and seemingly irrepressible extent of pluralism and fragmentation. The critical mass gained from Brennan's influence regarding the meaning of conscience, together with the ever-increasing pluralism and fragmentation, caused the public sphere to acquire a secular quality. One result of this process has been the alienation from the public sphere of those who understand the authority of the conscience as originating from a religious, communal and traditional source. Toward the end of his work, Smith states, "In comparison with its progenitors, the modern conscience is no humble servant of God and the church or the scriptures; it is proud, inflated, and freestanding." This, says Smith, is not a view that Thomas More would have supported, and, when compared to what More stood for in this regard, we now observe the disintegration of the conscience.

According to Smith, Madison's views represented the birth of the modern self and laid the groundwork for Brennan's further and substantial influence in this regard. Smith elaborates on why this approach threatens to dissolve the self, arguing that contemporary culture offers more questions than answers about what the meaning of the self should be. In contrast, Smith explains that according to traditional sources of authority, there is no such dilemma about how to understand the self. Under the heading "The Present Age Is Demented," he depicts a

tendency in modern society that he views as a manifestation of an inner fragmentation or dissolution of the self. This inner dissolution consists in the individual's incapacity "to know who she is, what she believes, or what she is doing," unlike the capacity of individuals in sixteenth-century Europe such as More.

Especially since about 1950, a profusion of scholarship has criticized the Enlightenment's demotion of God and its elevation of anthropocentrism and science. That massive accumulation of criticism has been further magnified recently over social media platforms. Consequently, it is necessary for a new scholarly work that points to "the decline of Modernity" to truly offer something novel in order to be worth our attention. *The Disintegration of the Conscience and the Decline of Modernity* does exactly this by ably addressing a key theme that has persisted in the modern era. Smith succinctly describes the importance of this theme by stating that his book examines "changing ideas about God or the nature of the human person" and that our understanding of the conscience is intimately related to fundamental issues such as God and human personhood. Conscience, he says, "has often been at the core of live political or legal controversies with existential consequences that have forced participants to articulate their assumptions and commitments not just in abstract or academic ways but in situations where a good deal – life or death, freedom or imprisonment – has been on the line."

This book highlights the enormity, complexity, resilience, danger, disenchantment and importance that accompany matters of conscience, which in turn are inextricably connected to the relationship between law, religion and the state. It offers a novel and convincing defence of conscience as understood both in the context of the pre-modern West and by religious communities and traditions in the modern era. Noting the failures of the idea of reason as the ultimate measure of and solution for the ordering of society, which especially emanated from the Enlightenment, Smith demonstrates that post-Enlightenment views of the conscience share a similar fate.

It is disturbing to be reminded that major transformations of concepts can result from unrestrainable developments within society at large. Communities of traditional faiths are uncontrollably dissolving whilst an ever-increasing pluralism advances. Consequently, concepts will have to be remoulded to adapt to the times, just as was the case with conscience. As to a solution to this "present demented age," Smith (with a reference to his previous published article titled "One Step Enough") calls for "one step, and then another, taken hopefully in accordance with and under the direction of what we might call ... conscience." I leave it to the reader to ponder upon what Smith might mean by these words.

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I Will Give Them an Everlasting Name: Pastoral Care for Christ's Converts from Islam

Duane Alexander Miller

Oxford: Regnum Books, 2020. 98 pp., ISBN: 978-1913363765, € 9,52

Duane Alexander Miller, who previously served as a Christian minister in Jordan and Israel, now teaches at the Protestant Faculty of Theology in Madrid, Spain, and is an Anglican priest at the Cathedral of the Redeemer. He wrote his University of Edinburgh PhD thesis on doing contextual theology with converts from Islam. Miller is, therefore, equipped to write as both a practitioner and researcher on pastoral care for Christian converts from Islam. His research is based on interviews conducted in multiple countries.

“Pastoral care” here is used in the broad sense of pastoring and discipling, or “feeding the sheep.” Miller begins with the observation that persecution is an issue for many Christian converts from Islam; the biggest challenge for them, however, is “the formation of a firm identity” (5). The book’s title refers to Isaiah 56:5, where an honorable and lasting identity, an “everlasting name,” is promised to people who were previously outside the people of God. In this context, pastoral care involves helping new Christians to find their “new identity in Christ and his community, the Church” (6).

Recently, missiological research has considered the spiritual, psychological and sociological issues connected with the “identity” of converts from Islam. Miller mentions some of this work (5-6). His book is less an academic contribution than a collection of practical advice. As such, it offers useful and sometimes surprising insights on caring for brothers and sisters with a Muslim background.

The book is easily readable, squeezing a lot of experience into 15 short chapters. Miller writes from a broad perspective of historical Christianity, openly noting his Anglican background but without excluding other perspectives. A helpful bibliography for further study appears at the end of the book.

Many of the identified problems and suggested solutions seemed consistent with my experience of many years in Turkey. Just to name a few:

- It is helpful for converts from Islam to learn about Christian roots in their country or in their ethnic group.
- We have to teach inductive Bible study so that believers may learn to find the ingredients of their new Christian identity themselves.
- The liturgical calendar and memorizing of creeds help converts to develop a balanced Christian perspective and to be equipped to answer questions about their new faith.

- The church has to be a new family and a new home for converts, who are often cut off from their social network because of their new faith.
- The time and the manner of the “coming out” of new believers to their families (41-44) has to be seriously considered. However: “There is clearly one course of action that is *not* viable: the convert never revealing their new faith” (41). This is a wise and clear statement against the ideas of some proponents of “insider movements.”

Other topics opened up a new perspective for me. For instance:

- Teaching the Old Testament should be a priority, to correct wrong concepts about God.
- An official status as a “new believer preparing for baptism” (like a catechumen in the Roman Catholic Church) might be a good step towards baptism, as an alternative to either rushing to baptize or postponing baptism to an indefinite future.
- Teaching new believers about the history of the particular Christian tradition we come from makes sense and is an integral part of honesty in “a period of global Christianity” (28).

The short, never-boring book is always thought-provoking and full of practical application to ministry among converts from Islam.

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Demystifying the Sacred: Blasphemy and Violence from the French Revolution to Today

Eveline G. Bouwers and David Nash (eds.)

Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2022. 303 pp. ISBN: 978-3110713022, € 51,95 (hardcover)

By critically reflecting upon the evolution of blasphemy and violence in contemporary societies, this book examines the complex relationship between freedom of expression and religious liberty in contemporary times. The original idea for the volume came from a conference organized in 2020 by Liberas (the central archive and research center for the liberal movement in Belgium) in conjunction with the School of History, Religion and Philosophy at Oxford Brookes University, and the Leibniz Institute of European History. The main idea of the conference and of the subsequent book is to critically approach the issue of blasphemy. This subject has been largely overlooked by historians, but it has great relevance for contemporary society, as the case of Samuel Paty in France (2020), the rise of violent Christian nationalism, the attack on Salman Rushdie in 2022, and other

incidents have distressingly evidenced. Although the book is primarily historical in perspective, it should be of wide interest to specialists in multiple fields, including legal, cultural and social history, as well as to anyone concerned about religious freedom.

The work is international in scope, covering various countries in Europe (France, Spain, Italy, Germany, England), as well as other countries with significant ties to European history, such as Russia and Tunisia. It also covers a range of church groups, mostly of Christian origin (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox). Two chapters address Islam. One or two case studies on the treatment of blasphemy in relation to Judaism could have been useful, but overall, the book achieves a rather impressive comparison between societies with different religious and political frameworks, in different time periods. In fact, the long-term chronological scope (from 1760 to the present) is valuable in helping us to better understand the non-linear evolution of the phenomenon. As a result, the reader can contrast different trends, such as the “medicalization of blasphemy” that took place in the late 18th century (11) and its increasing politicization as a form of religious, ethnic and ideological “apostasy.” We also observe the manifold ways in which legal responses to blasphemy point to “changing views of the sacred that have shaped and regulated modern societies” (118), as well as how they have informed the limits of religious and artistic freedom (121).

The various contributions to this volume achieve a rich dialogue between the legal history of blasphemy and socio-cultural analysis of individual case-studies. Each chapter explores a different aspect of the conceptual richness of blasphemy, along with its relation to heresy, apostasy and sacrilege, and to the multiple facets of sacrilegious violence (symbolic, imagined, felt, lived). As a result, *Demystifying the Sacred* significantly problematizes the association of rationalism and modernity with a simple decline of violence and religion in contemporary societies (17). Indeed, despite the advancement of secularization and the consolidation of religious pluralism in contemporary times, accusations of blasphemy have continued to be used in multiple ways: to damage and delegitimize a political other (chapters 2, 3, 4); to prove one’s allegiance to a revolutionary cause and justify its violence (chapter 2, 4); to stifle reform debates within a particular cult (chapter 5); or to consolidate ideas of public order, hygiene, morality and modernity (chapters 3, 6, 9). In addition, chapters 8 and 10 illustrate that in some instances, the violent way in which blasphemy is perceived and punished can even be a symptom of a broader political and/or religious crisis.

Furthermore, it is interesting to consider the ways in which blasphemy can be charged with a particular meaning within the dynamics of a wider empire. For example, it can become a method of providing legal equality to non-Christian re-

ligions (145). It can also be used as a means of establishing independence against the pressure of two competing imperial authorities (205). Finally, blasphemy can point to crucial questions of national and religious identity (chapter 7, 8), as well as to power imbalances within society (257), and between and within denominations (282).

Overall, the unifying argument of this volume is that in late modernity, blasphemy (and legislation and violence related to sacrilegious speech and acts) has served not only religious ends but also social and political ones. In this sense, it might have been interesting to include gender as a useful category of historical analysis, to cite Scott's well-known essay.¹ As depicted by most chapters in the book, public blasphemy in late modernity seems to be quite a manly affair. Was that really the case, or do we need to look further and rethink our historical approach? Traditionally, the relationship of women to the sacred is very complex. Were women (and their bodies) imagined objects of blasphemy, or could they also be participant agents? And how did the idea of blasphemy inform hegemonic and subversive ideals of masculinity and femininity? Another important insight of the volume that could be explored by further research relates to the way blasphemy could be considered part of a particular sub-culture "ready to be ignited at an opportune moment" (281).

Demystifying the Sacred successfully achieves its main objective of showing that blasphemy is not an anachronistic subject of interest or study today (283). Quite the contrary. As blasphemy laws of the past are being "replaced" in Europe (and other regions of the world) with laws against incitement of religious hatred (284), the latter retain aspects that are somewhat reminiscent of previous conceptualizations and practices (especially with regards to violence). This phenomenon, consequently, needs further consideration.

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1 Scott, J. W. (1986). "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91(5), 1053-1075.

Thomas Schirmacher

The Persecution of Christians

Concerns Us All



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WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE



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