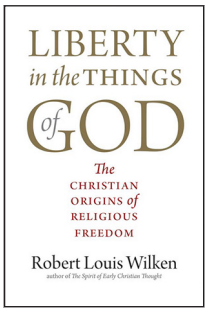
Book Review



Robert Louis Wilken.
Liberty in the Things of God:
The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom
New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019.
pp. 236, $26.00. ISBN 978-0300226638.

Reviewed by Brendon Michael Norton, Hamilton, MA

In his thoroughly researched new work, Wilken advances a thesis on the origins of religious freedom which is at odds with the received explanation. Rather than being the creation of Enlightenment thinkers rejecting the Christian religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, Wilken argues that religious liberty originates with Christians themselves. The building blocks of religious liberty, Wilken argues, can be traced back to the early Christian writers Tertullian and Lactantius, who advanced a constellation of ideas to argue against Roman persecution of Christians. In the following centuries, these ideas would continue to be used and refined by Christian thinkers, up to the point at which it influenced Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke.

Wilken's argument is undergirded by three historical themes. First, is the concept of conscience as an inward disposition, answerable to God, which cannot be coerced. Second, conscience carries with it a responsibility to act on its dictates, and third that the world is governed by two separate authorities, one spiritual, the other civil. In addition, Wilken aims to show that arguments for religious freedom were not focused primarily on the individual but were construed such that communities would be able to organize and act on conscience's demands to publicly worship (2-3).

The first chapter outlines Tertullian and Lactantius' early arguments for liberty of conscience in the face of Roman persecution. Tertullian was novel in his arguments by advocating for liberty of conscience as a moral necessity based off of the correct order of nature. This moral argument was predicated upon the doctrine of the *imago dei*. Lactantius added to these arguments by noting the futility of using violence to change an inner conviction. The writings of these two theologians are cited by most of the later figures to which the reader is introduced.

Chapters 2 covers the period from the 4th century to just prior to the Reformation. In this grand sweep Wilken shows that the ideas of Tertullian and Lactantius did not fall into complete disuse in the age of Christendom. In fact, this idea of liberty of conscience was extended to provide limited protections for Jews, argue against coercing heretics, and advocate against the forced conversions of Amerindians. Here Wilken also introduces the doctrine of the two swords which was the medieval formulation of the two authorities which govern Christian life.

Chapters 3-4 introduce the Reformation and how liberty of conscience was used not only by Protestants to defend their newly embraced doctrines, but also Catholics in the face of state-sanctioned pressure to convert. Wilken notes that while both Luther and Calvin spoke of conscience and the two kingdoms or realms,

both were committed to the notion of religion as the bond of society, and as such still gave room for secular power to ensure uniformity in faith. This tension between idea and practice in their thought reminds the reader that sin affects even the greatest of minds, and that ideas develop over time.

Chapters 5-6 address the post-Reformation reality that two confessions often existed in the same territory. For French thinkers such as Jean Bodin this situation meant that secular power could not coerce religious communities to adhere to the dominant faith of the country. France could and should tolerate two creeds within its borders. In the Netherlands, liberty as a natural right, in the modern sense, was first articulated. Additionally, a number of thinkers argued that because one must act on their conscience, religious communities must be allowed to gather and perform acts of worship. Something that Wilken brings up, which is often missed in contemporary appeals to rights, is that the Dutch thinkers did not freedom of worship as an act of self-restraint on the part of government, but as something fundamental to human nature as rooted in the *imago dei*. A rights language continues to expand, Christians can look to their ancestor's arguments in ensuring that such rights are grounded in something intrinsic to our nature as humans, not simply as a prerogative of government to create.

In chapters 6-8, the Christian ideas of religious freedom underwent more change and were as the oscillating faith of the English Monarchy gave both Catholics and Protestants opportunities to further refine the inherited wisdom of their forebearers. In detailing the Separatist contribution, we see the arguments for religious liberty reach their zenith. Through the writings of individuals such as Thomas Helwys and Roger Williams, the Christian argument for religious liberty as grounded in the *imago dei*, finally and without reservation was applied not only to Christians, but Muslims, Jews, and all other religious adherents.

In his final chapter, Wilken described the intellectual milieu of John Locke and how he was influenced by contemporaries such as John Owen and William Penn, and how his views evolved to become more in line with the modern conception of religious freedom through their influence. Locke, while receiving the credit, truly stood on centuries of Christian tradition in advocating for religious liberty.

This work demonstrates that Christians have long thought deeply about issues of religious liberty. Wilken's argument is supported by copious references to primary sources and a firm grasp of the historical settings of each thinker. He is careful to distinguish between what a writer is saying in their own context, lest the reader interpret an idea or phrase according to contemporary usage.

As a credit to his scholarship, Wilken does not try to whitewash the history of Christian initiated persecution. This is no hagiographical account of Christian actions, but one which seeks to show a very present, if lightly used, path of Christian thought which eventually culminated in the central value of the liberal order. This realistic approach both reminds the reader of the sinfulness even within the Christian, but also provides concrete examples of Christians who opposed the worst inclinations of the human heart. Perhaps my favorite surprise in this vein was to find that Alcuin, the great cleric to Charlemagne, challenged the king on his forced conversion of the Saxon's to Christianity. This balanced scholarship, as well as the thesis it advances, can serve an apologetic purpose in demonstrating the historical value and impact

of Christian thought to an increasingly hostile culture.

In speaking to Christians, themselves, this work can help us address contemporary concerns related to pluralism by pointing us to a wealth of resources for theological retrieval. As an example, we live in a time in which the commitment of European and American Christians to religious pluralism is declining. There are many today arguing that we must reassert Christian hegemony in the public square and even restrict the entrance of certain religious groups into the country if we are to preserve our society. However, a Christian thinker such as Roger Williams attacked this very notion that religion must be the bond of society. Multiple faiths can exist in a given society, because the bond is the common safety of persons and property, not a shared religion (150-51).

It is hoped that this work can serve as a gateway to renewed arguments and applications of religious freedom, not only for Christians, but for all made in the image of God.