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RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL
SOCIAL ETHICS: AN ASSESSMENT AND FRAMEWORK
FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL CHALLENGES

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APPROVAL SHEET

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL SOCIAL ETHICS: AN ASSESSMENT AND FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL CHALLENGES

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For my wife, Christian, and our daughters, Caroline, Catherine, and Charlotte

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PREFACE

The process of writing a dissertation is one of the most daunting tasks an individual can undertake. Because I liken everything to running metaphors, the dissertation is a marathon. The rhythms of life become subject to its demands, demands borne by many in my life for whom I am, and will remain, forever grateful.

First, I want to thank my doctoral advisor, Russell Moore, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC). Since 2008, Russell Moore has been an incalculable influence in my life—earning a gratitude I cannot express adequately in words. His own passion for religious liberty awakened my own interest, and any worthwhile idea argued in this dissertation is doubtlessly the result of his influence.

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Andrew T. Walker

Franklin, Tennessee

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In his seminal work on the foundation of evangelical ethics, the preeminent Anglican ethicist, Oliver O'Donovan, said the following about the nature of Christian ethics: "A belief in Christian ethics is a belief that certain ethical and moral judgments belong to the gospel itself; a belief, in other words, that the church can be committed to ethics without moderating the tone of its voice as a bearer of glad tidings."¹ O'Donovan's concern is one of both warning and correction: to resist the temptation within Christian ethics that would attempt to do ethics and moral theology apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ.² It is imperative that every task within the field of Christian ethics be done within the horizon of redemption and the unfolding of the kingdom of God.

Religious liberty is of supreme and foundational relevance to evangelical social ethics and public theology, but it lacks clear articulation and consensus as a distinctly evangelical enterprise. For the purposes of this dissertation, religious liberty is defined as the principle wherein every individual should be free to live out his or her understanding of the conscience's duty that is owed to God in all areas of life without liability to government penalty or social harassment.³ Seen from this angle, religious liberty comprises elements of both worship and ethics. Religious liberty is a juncture

¹Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 12.

²Under these conditions, O'Donovan is right to observe, "There can be ethical Christians without there being Christian ethics." Ibid., 11.

³Another possible definition: Religious liberty is the principle that religious persons and institutions should have the ability to freely accept or reject religiously-inspired doctrines, and the corresponding freedom to exercise these religious convictions without fear of civil penalty or civil control.

where one's duty to God intersects with one's obligation to live out religious and moral commitments. It preserves the ability of individuals, and individuals gathered in religious communities, to voluntarily respond to their individual and collective understanding of divine truth and to manifest the obligations of that divine truth in every dimension of one's life.⁴

As a topic within evangelical social ethics, religious liberty is an assumed principle taken for granted, but insufficiently explicated on biblical and theological grounds. Most often, religious liberty is situated as an answer to political realities.⁵ Or religious liberty takes its cues from political philosophy, whether liberal or conservative.⁶

⁴It is also worth stating what I am not trying to accomplish in my use of the term "religious liberty." For purposes of this dissertation, the relationship between church and state should not be considered synonymous with religious liberty. While they share overlapping themes of remarkable similarity, the focus of this dissertation is on religious liberty; more specifically, a theological account for why the individual ought, by necessity, to be free to pursue truth unhindered—even in error—while in a secular era of contestability. While this dissertation necessarily engages important themes on the proper relationship between church and state, the focus is on furnishing an account for why individuals must be free to pursue religious truth with as few impediments as possible.

⁵The popular misconception that religious liberty is first an issue of statecraft, and secondarily a theological and ethical matter is represented in, for example, Christian ethicist Phillip Wogaman's declaration that "religious liberty is distinctively a political problem, however much it depends upon theological insight for principled solution." J. Philip Wogaman, *Protestant Faith and Religious Liberty* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967), 148. My own position is that religious liberty is a distinctively theological enterprise that helps address pre-political realities related to the person's experience of God and then the outworking of that experience that creates possible social tensions and social crises. Religious liberty is not merely an answer to problems that statecraft poses.

⁶For a survey of religious liberty in contemporary political philosophy, see Robert P. George, *Clash of Orthodoxies: Law, Religion, & Morality In Crisis* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2002); Robert P. George, *Conscience and Its Enemies: Confronting the Dogmas of Liberal Secularism* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2013); John Corvino, Ryan T. Anderson, and Sherif Girgis, *Debating Religious Liberty and Discrimination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Martha Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2016); Noel B. Reynolds and W. Cole Durham, Jr., eds., *Religious Liberty in Western Thought*, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); William A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Marc O. DeGirolami, *The Tragedy of Religious Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Vincent Phillip Muñoz, "Two Concepts of Religious Liberty: The Natural Rights and Moral Autonomy Approaches to the Free Exercise of Religion," *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 2 (May 2016): 369-81; Rex Ahdar and Ian Leigh, *Religious Freedom in the Liberal State*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

And if not political philosophy, it is often situated as a sociological study concerning how attempts at pluralism and social difference can prosper.⁷ It is religious liberty's lack of explicit connection to, and consensus around, categories such as eschatology, anthropology, and soteriology in contemporary evangelical literature that gives rise to an important aspect of this dissertation. When one reviews evangelical literature surrounding religious liberty, there is a scarcity of resources that provide systematic Christian accounts of religious liberty's intelligibility.

Moreover, when surveying the topics of interest for evangelical ethics, especially within evangelical ethics textbooks, the literature is replete with whole titles and chapters on such subjects as abortion, capital punishment, homosexuality, marriage and family, and euthanasia, but religious liberty is conspicuously lacking in proportional representation and emphasis.⁸ There is not a single volume by an evangelical scholar that attempts to offer a systemic account for religious liberty's theological origins and purpose

⁷Timothy Samuel Shah et al., *Religious Freedom: Why Now? Defending an Embattled Human Right* (Princeton, NJ: Witherspoon Institute, 2012).

⁸Religious liberty is typically tucked away as a sub-category in evangelical ethics volumes under the rubric of church and state. One such example is Dennis Hollinger's otherwise excellent volume, *Choosing the Good*. The chapter that comes closest to themes related to religious liberty is his "Pluralism and Christian Ethics." Even there, however, Hollinger never engages in a biblical defense of religious liberty. Instead, his focus is on how Christians can relate to one another in a diverse society. Religious liberty or religious freedom is never mentioned, much less theologically explicated. For more, see Dennis P. Hollinger, *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 238-55. Another representative approach to Christian ethics is found in John Jefferson Davis' classic *Evangelical Ethics*. Nowhere in the volume is religious liberty discussed. John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2015). In a sixteen-chapter volume on political strategies for evangelical public policy, not a single chapter deals explicitly with religious liberty. Instead, the subject finds one paltry mention in a section within a chapter titled "Citizenship, Civil Society, and the Church" by Joseph Laconte. Even here there is no principled or theological defense of religious liberty, but only a mention of James Madison's religious liberty contributions. Joseph Laconte, "Citizenship, Civil Society, and the Church," in *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy: Political Strategies for the Health of the Nation*, ed. Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 194-212. And lastly, in a recently published volume, *Five Views on the Church and State*, not a single contributor makes reference, explicitly, to religious liberty. Amy E. Black and Stanley N. Gundry, eds., *Five Views on the Church and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

within the biblical storyline.⁹ This absence is a problem because religious liberty ought to function as a preeminent foundation for evangelicals' understanding of their entry into the public square as religious individuals embedded within religious communities that exist in diverse social contexts.¹⁰ Understood properly, religious liberty is a foundational pillar to evangelical social ethics since every other topical engagement within the public square presumes its presence. The ability, for example, to advocate for the unborn—whether praying in front of an abortion clinic or casting one's vote in a referendum on the issue—assumes some framework that makes such activity possible. How the church relates to the state, and the freedoms Christians ought to enjoy in society, are paramount issues to any evangelical public theology. To dismiss or overlook the centrality that religious liberty plays in developing an evangelical public theology is a stunning oversight, and demonstrates a failure to establish first principles that are necessary for the church's mission in society.

Religious liberty not only addresses questions about religious exercise and the relationship between church and state and the church and the world. It is central to developing a Christian understanding of how the church relates to the world in a time when Christ's kingdom has been inaugurated, but awaits final consummation. Religious liberty, then, is of deep eschatological concern since it helps understand the church's

⁹The two volumes that come closest to this endeavor are Os Guinness, *The Global Public Square: Religious Freedom and the Making of a World Safe for Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013); Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell, eds., *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Liberty* (Nashville: B & H, 2016).

¹⁰Consider the manifold ways that religious liberty addresses key aspects of social ethics and public theology: Religious liberty supplies the justification for how religious persons act freely on religiously motivated ethics. Second, religious liberty helps delineate the distinction between the church and the world, and how the church ought to relate to the state. Third, religious liberty clarifies ethical duties that consciences owe a Creator, and how those obligations are discharged. Consider also alternate cognates for religious liberty and its central fixture to theology and ethics: Exercising conscience is related to moral agency, which presumes upon a moral horizon for intelligibility; the conscience apprehending truth is related to duty; and the distinction between where the kingdom of God presently reigns is related to identity and mission.

mission and expectations in society. It is also central to questions of Jesus's kingship over consciences that are to be held accountable to future judgment, and the manner in which individuals come to apprehend the gospel (John 5:27; 2 Cor 5:11; 2 Pet 3:9-10).¹¹

This lack of systematic focus amid evangelical scholarship reveals itself within one of the perennial disputes at play with religious liberty: Religious liberty's lack of explicit reference in the Bible. As those who prioritize biblical authority and *sola scriptura*, how can religious liberty become an issue of evangelical preeminence and focus when the phrase "religious liberty" is nowhere in the Bible? J. D. Hughey recognizes this concern, but calls religious liberty "implicit" in Christian teaching:

Religious liberty is not a truth explicitly revealed in Scripture, nor does it have much place in the traditional formulations of theology, which originated at a time when coercive authority was the normative principle of human relations. However, religious liberty is implicit in Christian theology, and theologians, eager to lay solid foundations for freedom already achieved or still to be won, are giving serious attention to it. Several major Christian doctrines have implications for religious liberty.¹²

In commenting on the absence of direct references to religious liberty in the Bible, A. F. Carrillo De Albornoz observes, "It [religious liberty] is not in single passages in the Bible, it is God's whole way of approaching mankind that gives us our lead."¹³ Albornoz goes on to state "our prime question is, therefore, to investigate this 'nexus' or to see

¹¹I would contend that the underdeveloped theological aspects of religious liberty in American evangelical social ethics is the result of being situated in an American context, which focuses almost exclusively on matters related to religious exercise and religious establishment debates found in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. American evangelicals find themselves held captive to a culture that engages in debates on religious liberty more out of pragmatic concerns to negotiate competing claims of power.

¹²John David Hughey, "The Theological Frame of Religious Liberty," *The Christian Century* 80, no. 45 (November 1963): 1365. The categories Hughey lists that are relevant to religious liberty are liberty and the sovereignty of God, humanity as free and responsible, liberty and the lordship of Christ, external liberty and inner freedom, the nature of the church, and the nature of the gospel.

¹³A. F. Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty* (New York: Association Press, 1963), 56.

exactly how religious liberty is implied in the Christian revelation.”¹⁴ The nature of this “nexus” is a driving force behind the motivation for this dissertation.

These observations give rise to the most troubling reality concerning religious liberty already mentioned: Recent evangelical scholarship, in both quantity and quality, has failed to provide a robust, systematic foundation or account that makes religious liberty intelligibly evangelical.¹⁵ Indeed, there is no evangelical consensus for developing an intelligible framework or conceptuality around religious liberty that incorporates basic elements of theology deemed essential to the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ When one examines religious liberty in contemporary evangelical thought, it lacks connection to

¹⁴Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty*, 56.

¹⁵To demonstrate how meager biblical and theological scholarship is surrounding religious liberty, I located only five volumes dedicated solely to religious liberty’s theological and biblical underpinnings: Wogaman, *Protestant Faith and Religious Liberty*; Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty*. Both volumes were written in the 1960s, and neither author holds evangelical commitments to biblical authority and biblical inspiration. An edited volume by Baptist scholars explores different biblical facets of religious liberty but cannot be considered systematic or comprehensive, see Duesing, White, and Yarnell, *First Freedom*. Popular evangelical author Os Guinness has contributed a volume to religious liberty, but the arguments contained therein are neither biblical nor theological in nature. Rather, Guinness situates religious liberty as a necessary component to uphold Western liberal order, Guinness, *The Global Public Square*. Additionally, exhaustive searches have located only a handful of articles concerning biblical and theological foundations for religious liberty have been located: Niels S  , “The Theological Basis of Religious Liberty,” *The Ecumenical Review* 11, no. 1 (October 1958): 36-42; Hughey, “The Theological Frame of Religious Liberty”; James E. Wood, “A Biblical View of Religious Liberty,” *The Ecumenical Review* 30, no. 1 (January 1978): 32-41; Amos Niven Wilder, “Eleutheria in the New Testament and Religious Liberty,” *The Ecumenical Review* 13, no. 4 (July 1961): 409-20; Rebecca C. Mathis, “The Roots of Religious Liberty in Scripture,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 55, no. 4 (2012): 389-402; Jim Spivey, “Separation No Myth: Religious Liberty’s Biblical and Theological Bases,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 36, no. 3 (1994): 10-16. One other additional resource is Barrett Duke’s helpful chapter articulating the Christian basis for religious liberty. See Barrett Duke, “The Christian Doctrine of Religious Liberty,” in *First Freedom*, ed. Duesing, White, and Yarnell, 83-110. A forthcoming volume from biblical scholar Michael Bird is slated to publish in 2018, Michael F. Bird, *Free to Believe: Why We Must Stand Up for Religious Freedom and How We Can Do It* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming). Bird was kind to send me a copy of the manuscript. Notably, and central to the argument I am making about the state of evangelical ethics around religious liberty, Bird’s volume provides no substantive biblical-theological account for religious liberty on evangelical grounds.

¹⁶However, this is not to say that religious liberty has been altogether neglected. As I later demonstrate, tangential references to religious liberty appear in several works of evangelical theology and ethics. Rather, my emphasis is on the lack of intentional effort to address religious liberty as a single stand-alone issue on its own merit, and the failure to develop any type of consensus receiving broad purchase amongst evangelical scholars.

central biblical motifs and is situated predominantly as a concern about preserving religious identity and religious exercise in pluralistic societies. Indeed, in contemporary evangelical literature surrounding religious liberty, pluralism, and negotiations around cultural conflicts determine the context for evangelical formulations of religious liberty more so than a biblical emphasis that establishes any theological and ethical rationale for religious liberty.

The failure of evangelicals to develop a consensus around religious liberty is further evidence of evangelicalism's underdeveloped social ethics, an area whose nascence has plagued contemporary evangelical social thought. With religious liberty left almost exclusively to the province of legal theory and political philosophy, evangelicals are lacking vital theological foundations for a key component of evangelical social ethics.

Other key questions emerge that are helpful in diagnosing religious liberty's neglected status: How ought we to appraise whether there is an evangelical consensus around religious liberty? Is there an overarching interpretive framework or consensus for understanding how evangelicals should understand religious liberty? Relatedly, is there an overarching framework for evangelicals to appropriate religious liberty in their particular American context? Has religious liberty been couched as a discipline that is religious in nature or political? Is there sufficient theological and biblical warrant in making religious liberty explicitly evangelical? Are there similar themes, contours, or theological camps in which to group religious liberty scholarship? Is religious liberty more influenced by theological formulations or by liberal democratic conceptions of individual agency and human rights?¹⁷ Why is it important for evangelicals to integrate religious liberty into their social ethics? And what has happened as a result of anemic evangelical approaches to religious liberty? These questions arise when seeking a remedy

¹⁷For a helpful volume that integrates Lockean motifs to evangelical social ethics and religious liberty, see Greg Forster, *The Contested Public Square: The Crisis of Christianity and Politics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008).

to the problem of religious liberty's conspicuous absence in evangelical social ethics and all serve as a major foil to this dissertation's overall argument.

Concerning religious liberty, both religion and state are forced to reckon with the authority claims of the other. In this sense, religious liberty is a crucial cipher to unlocking the statecraft of a political community. As one scholar has commented, "It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it is in its posture toward religion that a nation most fully and clearly defines itself."¹⁸ These striking words uttered by Thomas Pangle capture the gravity of religious liberty. The emergence of a consensus around religious liberty is foundational for evangelical social ethics because "authentic Christian faith necessarily means, for the Church as well as the individual Christian, involvement within an historical context."¹⁹ Like the conceptuality of the church's role in Augustine's *City of God*, a greater evangelical self-awareness concerning its own conceptuality of religious liberty will enhance its understanding of the church's identity and mission at a time when history is buffeted by competing claims of authority and allegiance.²⁰ Moreover, a failure to develop an overarching framework for religious liberty will result in prolonged disconnect with key themes central to evangelical concerns. Thus, the lack of consensus or framework around religious liberty jeopardizes the possibility of developing a truly evangelical understanding of religious liberty for social ethics.

Thesis

The remedy to an anemic or underdeveloped biblical-theological basis for religious liberty is to anchor religious liberty to biblical motifs central to the Christian narrative. Indeed, a failure to develop a robust Christian social ethic of religious liberty

¹⁸Thomas L. Pangle, "The Accommodation of Religion: A Tocquevillian Perspective," in *Religious Liberty in Western Thought*, ed. Reynolds and Durham, 291.

¹⁹Wood, "A Biblical View of Religious Liberty," 41.

²⁰Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. R. W. Dyson, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

leaves such an important principle to the spheres of constitutionalism, humanism, or secularism to articulate. Such an outcome would be disastrous. On the harmful effects of leaving religious liberty within the domain of theological liberalism or humanism,

C. Emanuel Carlson comments,

Now if humanism is the fundamental basis of our movement, then we are involved on the horns of a quite different dilemma.

The first horn is theological. The concern for liberty might be disassociated from the redemptive work of Christ. It may have nothing to do with Christology or eschatology or with much more that is traditional Christian theology. In this event the emphasis on religious liberty must be viewed as part of theological liberalism whose day may be declining.

The rebirth of biblical theology, whether taken within the framework of neo-orthodoxy or of more conservative theological works, would then leave the tradition of liberty to dwindle. It will be dwarfed in Christian circles unless somehow related to both Christology and eschatology. If the authority of the lordship of Christ in the church and in the experience of the person contravenes our understanding of the nature of man as expressed in the doctrines of religious liberty, the future of liberty is not bright at the present time.²¹

The quest to solve the dilemma of religious liberty's broader reach into biblical theology is the central and driving concern of this dissertation, and the quest to tether religious liberty to areas such as eschatology, anthropology, and soteriology form central planks in the overall argument of this project.

This dissertation begins with the observation that within contemporary evangelical social ethics and public theology, an overarching consensus on how to understand religious liberty as an explicitly Christian social ethic is lacking. To be clear, academic literature demonstrates various ways in which Christian ethics has theorized about religious liberty, but these approaches are piecemeal and not systematic; nor do they take into consideration, generally speaking, key themes in biblical theology. Much evidence suggests that evangelical ruminations around religious liberty are informed more by theism and constitutionalism than explicit theological coherence. Indeed, when

²¹Carl Emanuel Carlson, "Need for Study of the Biblical Basis of Religious Liberty," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 16, no. 2 (1959): 141.

one surveys varying approaches to religious liberty, different themes for categorization emerge that illustrate disparate, though not contradictory, foundations for understanding religious liberty as distinctively Christian.²²

This dissertation argues that an evangelical approach to religious liberty is centrally concerned with recognizing Jesus's kingship over the conscience and his absolute and exclusive right to execute judgment over it; and this appropriation of religious liberty is best understood when built upon the foundational biblical motifs of the kingdom of God, the image of God, and the mission of God. The reality of Christ's sovereign, advancing kingship is the ground for which religious liberty ought to be intelligible for evangelicals.

To use a metaphor for clearer explanation, think of a stool with three equal and corresponding legs that comprise the overall structure. This dissertation argues that an evangelical consensus around religious liberty ought to be derived from these three categories (each a corresponding leg in the stool) because they offer a distinctly Christian framework that incorporate necessary components for an evangelical consensus around religious liberty: eschatology (kingdom of God), anthropology (image of God), and soteriology (mission of God). These themes are both biblical and systematic in the overall storyline of Scripture. The importance of demonstrating how religious liberty intersects with central motifs in the Bible cannot be overstated. On the need for identifying a “nexus” concerning religious liberty, C. Emanuel Carlson makes a plea to evangelical scholars: “In short, if the message of religious liberty is a distinctive one that has coherence

²²For three examples, see Phillip Wogaman's emphasis on the sovereignty of God in *Protestant Faith and Religious Liberty*, 10; early church arguments against coercion and the necessity of authentic and voluntary expression of worship in Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christian Roots of Religious Freedom* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2014), 18; and Jonathan Leeman's interesting argument drawing from Gen 9 that “God has not authorized human beings to prosecute crimes against himself,” Jonathan Leeman, *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ's Rule* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2016), 201. These are just a few examples.

between the various elements that make up the Christian faith, it is our responsibility to lay bare the inter-relationships.”²³

To explain this coherence and how the inter-relationships of biblical themes inform religious liberty, the following paragraphs will give a brief description of the aspects mentioned above.

First, religious liberty begins not with intricate discussions surrounding jurisprudence, legal philosophy, or even with questions about state authority over religious affairs or the exercise of religious ethics, but with a central question that the kingdom of God answers: What must I do to be saved (Acts 16:30)?²⁴ Religious liberty is concerned with matters of salvation, because religious liberty is first concerned with how one is saved, where one is saved, and who holds ultimate judgment.²⁵ Is one saved through good works? Or is one saved through the workings of the individual conscience brought to faith through repentance? And moreover, if salvation is accomplished through individual consciences and agency, the reality of individual agency has immense consequences for lesser authorities or attempted mediators that would attempt to disrupt or thwart one’s active response to God. If religious liberty is a matter of conscience, who has the ability to execute judgment on redeemed or erring consciences? If salvation is experienced personally and communally through membership in the church, what are the boundaries that come to distinguish the church from the rest of the world—and the church from the state? And central to these questions is one overarching question: How does inaugurated eschatology play into the current role of the state and the mission of the church in society?

²³Carlson, “Need for Study of the Biblical Basis of Religious Liberty,” 140.

²⁴I am indebted to my doctoral supervisor, Russell D. Moore, for this insight. Seen from this vantage point, religious liberty is ultimately about the accountability of the conscience (Acts 17:31). How the accountability of the conscience is understood speaks volumes about one’s concept of political authority versus God’s authority, and God’s authority mediated through Christ’s rule.

²⁵The answers to these three questions are the following: Individuals are saved by faith in Jesus Christ through the conscience’s recognition of guilt before a holy God who has the ability to execute judgment over persons.

This dissertation answers that question by arguing the kingdom of God is the standard of measurement by which the authority of the state and authority it possesses in a secular age of contestability is determined.

Second, a Christian approach to religious liberty must determine the nature and function of the person and the conscience in relationship to the kingdom of God. The doctrine of the image of God offers the proper foundation for questions related to anthropology and the conscience because it secures the inviolability and integrity of the conscience as teleologically ordered to God and rightly held liable to judgment. Second, the image of God is the best place to locate a doctrine of human rights that makes religious liberty an issue of practical application and relevance to Western political order.²⁶ The image of God enshrines non-coercion and voluntary worship as foundational components for religious liberty.²⁷ Concerning natural law formulations of religious liberty that further explain the inviolability of the conscience, understanding the image of God and its meaning for humans as being rational and free creatures helps confer dignity over the conscience and helps further establish the anthropological foundation for religious liberty.²⁸ The

²⁶For a scholarly look at Christianity's connection to human rights, see John Witte, Jr., and Frank S. Alexander, eds., *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Kevin P. Lee, "Deeper Longings: The Relevance of Christian Theology for Contemporary Rights Theories," *Ave Maria Law Review* 3, no. 1 (2005): 289-302; Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Modern Protestant Developments in Human Rights," in *Christianity and Human Rights*, ed. Witte and Alexander, 155-72; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

²⁷Consider the church father Tertullian's famous observation concerning the voluntary nature of faith: "Nevertheless, it is a basic human right that everyone should be free to worship according to his own convictions. No one is either harmed or helped by another man's religion. Religion must be practiced freely, not by coercion; even animals for sacrifice must be offered with a willing heart. So even if you compel us to sacrifice, you will not be providing your dos with any worthwhile service. They will not want sacrifices from unwilling offerers—unless they are perverse, which God is not." *Ad Scapulum*, quoted in Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014), 78.

²⁸Christopher Tollefsen, "Conscience, Religion and the State," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 54, no. 1 (January 2009): 93-115.

conscience is also the vehicle held accountable to Christ and subject to judgment by Christ (Acts 17:31).

Third, religious liberty is a necessary component for the unhindered advance of the gospel. By understanding the relationship between the kingdom of God and the image of God properly, this dissertation concludes with a view that sees religious liberty as a necessary biblical-theological ingredient to mission and as equally pertinent to the purpose of mission, namely, soteriology. An evangelical account of religious liberty, driven out of concern for a proper understanding of soteriology, must determine the relationship between the mission of God and the mission of the state in light of the current era of redemptive history.²⁹ By examining the era of history in which the church's mission is located, an evangelical understanding of mission and religious liberty should develop a concept of temporal pluralism, encourage contestability among divergent religious and ideological viewpoints, and foster a cultural milieu that prioritizes religious liberty for the sake of the common good.

Lastly, in application to matters of public policy, this dissertation will argue that the framework provided within the dissertation provides a deployable strategy as evangelicals understand the task and purpose of religious liberty within the public square.³⁰

On examining the importance of explaining why it is important to have a coherent understanding of religious liberty, C. Emanuel Carlson argues that Christians have an obligation to the world around them:

Now if religious liberty is an integral part of Christian thinking, as I am convinced it is, if it stems from our religious presuppositions, then we have an obligation to make

²⁹Robert A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

³⁰Carlson is again instructive on these matters of relating a Christian view of religious liberty to issues of public policy: "Finally, if the American Protestant movement has coherence and unity in its ideological structure then we face the further responsibility of applying those fundamental insights in our own particular institutional policies as part of our Christian witness." Carlson, "Need for Study of the Biblical Basis of Religious Liberty," 140.

these relationships clear so that this modern confused world can understand. If there are such relationships, they should become clear in our preaching and teaching.³¹

Carlson's concerns are correct. And this dissertation attempts to take up this charge. A tradition aware of its own internal views on religious liberty is obligated out of concern for social witness to see such views publicly articulated for its own behalf, but also for what its articulation and coherence might mean or society's flourishing.

In conclusion, this dissertation seeks to remedy the gap in evangelical social ethics by demonstrating the relevance of religious liberty to evangelical social ethics and by providing an overarching framework for understanding religious liberty as an intelligibly Christian project for social ethics.

Background

The interest in devoting a whole dissertation to religious liberty comes at a time when religious liberty is one of the most contested concepts in American culture.³² From accusations that religious liberty represents a "license to discriminate," to the growing reality that more and more citizens are identifying as religiously unaffiliated, the future of religious liberty in America is unsettled and uncertain; and thus a central pillar at the heart of the American political order is no longer safely assumed. While conflicts between LGBT rights and the concerns about religious liberty protections for religious conservatives show few signs of resolving, that is not the particular reason I have chosen to write about religious liberty as the focus of my dissertation.

My main reason for writing on religious liberty is that the themes contained within religious liberty intersect with themes that have driven the focus of my professional career as an aspiring scholar focused on the intersection of religion and politics driven by a robustly Christian social ethic that is uncompromisingly faithful to biblical orthodoxy.

³¹Carlson, "Need for Study of the Biblical Basis of Religious Liberty," 139.

³²This comment is not meant to convey carelessness to religious liberty's decline throughout the global West, in addition to threats to religious liberty posed by Islamic governments in the Middle East and Communist governments in the East.

Religious liberty encompasses broad categories of personal interest including political philosophy, jurisprudence, natural law, social ethics, public theology, and political theology. These topics cannot be neatly separated when talking about religious liberty, and so it is no surprise that the interdisciplinary aspects of religious liberty contribute heavily to my ongoing interest in the subject.

Closely related, as a convictional Baptist, I have a passionate desire to see a new generation of religious liberty scholarship emerge from within the Baptist tradition. Religious liberty is one of the chief hallmarks of Baptist identity; and it would be a tragic loss of confessional identity for religious liberty to lose its unique Baptist overtures and contributions. This aspect was made particularly pressing during an important conversation I had at the 2016 Southern Baptist Convention. In conversation with Baptist historians Jason Duesing and Nathan Finn, I told them of my research interests around religious liberty and expressed concern to them that in a recent seminar paper, I was both shocked and saddened to see how malnourished religious liberty was from its lack of attention in evangelical scholarly literature. Both agreed with my assessment and communicated the need for religious liberty scholarship to gain greater focus. As a millennial Southern Baptist, their concern presented me with an opportunity to explore a subject I love and a subject worthy of a dissertation.

Of course, I would also be remiss if I failed to note the impact of Baptist theologian and ethicist Russell Moore's influence over my life, and in the direction of this dissertation. It has been through working alongside him for almost five years, and knowing him as a pastor, professor, mentor, and friend in some capacity since 2008 that I have been drawn to the centrality of religious liberty. Seeing his tenacity in the fight for religious liberty is contagious, and it comes with no small amount of conflict as religious liberty is attacked from both liberal and conservative wings. His influence over my life, my thinking, and my interest in religious liberty is immeasurable.

Lastly, one particular comment by Carl F. H. Henry that I read in 2012 briefly captures why I am driven to issues of religious liberty: “If the Church fails to apply the central truths of Christian religion to social problems correctly,” Henry wrote, “someone else will do so incorrectly.”³³ Henry’s message is so convicting because it is a call to arms and a reminder that Christianity is not an other-worldly religion. Christianity offers a comprehensive critique against the claims of secularism and modernity. The Christian religion believes that it has the proper diagnosis of humanity’s plight and the message of its restoration. Religious liberty can never be severed from this central truth. From the New Testament onward, the message of Christianity has impacted kings, empires, and modern nation-states with a message of competing kingship (Matt 2:1-18; Acts 17:7; Rev 2:26-27). How history has reckoned with the claim of Jesus Christ’s kingship has been a driving force in world history ever since a once-and-former corpse walked out of a grave and claimed to be a king (Acts 17:7; Rev 15:3).

Seen in this light, the story of the Christian message that Jesus is Lord is one of working out this central proclamation in political contexts that have (1) received such news with glad acceptance, (2) sought to distort this message for political gain, or (3) rejected the message of Jesus’s kingship altogether. As a Christian dedicated to Francis Schaeffer’s proposition that Christianity is “true truth,”³⁴ Christian teaching on religious liberty demands greater explanation because the Christian gospel impacts people who inhabit particular places at particular times in history with the announcement that the kings and governments of the world do not possess absolute authority over all matters pertaining to humanity’s existence.

³³Carl F. H. Henry, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), 82.

³⁴Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 30th anniversary ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1972), 42.

To understand the justification for this dissertation, one must review, however briefly, contemporary approaches to religious liberty taken in Christian social ethics. I have identified four major approaches to religious liberty taken by evangelicals in recent evangelical proposals:³⁵ biblical pluralists, anti-modernists, principled pluralists, and Christotelic pluralists,³⁶ A brief definition of each category follows. It is worth emphasizing, once more, that none of the authors or volumes mentioned in the literature review set out to offer a robust defense of religious liberty on its own terms. Rather, religious liberty and considerations about the relationship between church and state were the result of conclusions drawn from broader arguments. Relatedly, the categories and voices listed below are intended to be representative (covering the most important contributions) rather than comprehensive (covering all contributions).

First, biblical pluralist evangelicals have attempted to derive a biblical-theological foundation for religious liberty from various biblical texts. Whether derived from the Noahic Covenant,³⁷ Matthew 22—”Render unto Caesar what is

³⁵Admittedly, these categories are subjective, but they are designed to be heuristic in nature. The rationale for their explanation in this section is merely to provide broad overview of recent proposals related to religious liberty by evangelical scholars.

³⁶“Christotelic” is a neologism I coined for this dissertation that focuses on seeing all aspects of Christian ethics, particularly religious liberty, from the perspective of any given subject being oriented to, completed by, and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

³⁷David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014). Through the Noahic covenant (Gen 9:1-7), God “provisionally sustains” creation and institutions of creation necessary for fostering political and cultural life in a postlapsarian world. The Noahic covenant is non-salvific and pertains only to common morality. This morality is the content of the natural law. The Abrahamic, Mosaic, and New covenants, however, are covenants of grace. Moreover, the Noahic covenant is provisional, meaning its institution only matters up until Christ returns and consummates history through judgment. Because the Noahic covenant remains operative and universally applicable, this has massive implications for how God has structured the relationship between ultimate and penultimate authorities. Ibid., 205, 480-87, 509. According to VanDrunen,

God established the Noahic covenant with the entire human race and gave no religious qualification for participation in its blessings and activities. If God called all human beings generally to the pursuit of procreation, eating, and justice (and whatever other obligations this covenant entails), without excluding people for reason of religious profession, then excluding people for this reason is inherently problematic. Also significant is how Genesis 9:6 commands the pursuit of justice and authorizes the use of coercion through the *lex talionis*, which concerns *intrahuman* disputes and the injuries one person inflicts upon another. It does not speak of human beings prosecuting each other for wrongs

Caesars,”³⁸ or the “Two Families” thesis,³⁹ the common feature of biblical pluralists is the attempt to deduce religious liberty from prior biblical themes and texts.⁴⁰ The obvious nature of this statement notwithstanding, the exegetical use of the Bible for developing a robust concept of religious liberty in this category remains “thin” as opposed to “thick.”

inflicted upon God. Therefore, to prohibit a person from engaging in a particular kind of religious practice, which does not injure another person but allegedly injured God, seems to transgress the boundaries of rightful human authority under the Noahic covenant. Ibid., 131-32.

There is thus a two-fold purpose for religious liberty. First, religious liberty is based on the quote, which indicates that God did not intend to endow earthly governments to prosecute crimes against Him. Second, according to VanDrunen, religious liberty is primarily aimed at the preservation of society. It “keeps the peace,” so to speak. VanDrunen believes that there is no “ultimate” right to religious freedom, but only a penultimate right before fellow humans instituted by God, because, ultimately, the arc of history will culminate in Christ judging all false gods and ideologies that do not confess Him as king.

³⁸In his massive 600-page volume *Politics according to the Bible*, evangelical theologian Wayne Grudem dedicates very few pages to a biblical-theological defense of religious liberty, nothing of which could be considered systematic nor a priority given the size of the volume. Wayne A. Grudem, *Politics according to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 23-29; 99-101; 499-503. Grudem’s primary point of reference is the distinction between the realms of God and Caesar evident in Jesus’s teachings on God’s authority and Caesar’s coin in Matt 22. This has implications for the domains of authority and jurisdiction between the two spheres. Most notably, Grudem focuses on how this principle indicates that Jesus never compelled his listeners to follow him, that authentic faith cannot be coerced, and that the church’s governance is not “worldly” in terms of having authorized jurisdiction over civil matters.

³⁹John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008). In his discussion of how the “state” came into existence, biblically, Frame argues that, in effect, “two families” simultaneously govern human existence. These “families” represent the family of Adam (fallen) and Christ (redeemed). As Adam’s family grew larger, it became necessary for an apparatus resembling the state to take shape in order to administer law and order in society. At the same time, a redeemed government consisting of the church administers spiritual authority. According to Frame: “In short, there are two families: the family of Adam and the family of Christ. Each has grown large, and has therefore developed complicated governmental structures. These structures are similar. Both have written laws. Both have title to territory on the earth. Both are ruled by “elders” and have officers. Both have judicial functions. Both are religious, for they both operate according to ultimate values. There are also, of course, differences between the two families. The family of Christ may not bear the sword to advance its territory. The family of Adam is not authorized to administer the sacraments.” Ibid., 601. In Frame’s discussion of the issue, authority and jurisdiction is the implied basis for any discussion related to religious liberty. Yet, Frame offers no New Testament defense for religious liberty, and issues of the state’s competence and authority over religious affairs are not discussed in terms of competing claims of jurisdiction. This is why, as a practical matter, Frame’s framework does not help settle any disputes; it just theologizes about the roles of certain spheres. While Frame does confess his own affinities for a Kuyperian approach to church and state, a distinctly exegetical defense of religious liberty is in indeed lacking, as well as is any discussion on how his Kuyperianism handles issues of pluralism, or the threats of secularism. This fact is worth noting considering that Frame’s volume on the Christian life is over one thousand pages.

⁴⁰I am aware that this statement would apply equally to the Christotelic pluralists.

By this, the authors in this category have not given significant, intentional weight to the overall theme of religious liberty systematically. Instead, religious liberty is deduced more than it is fulsomely articulated.

Second, anti-modernists (who could fit in the biblical pluralist model as well) have developed conceptions of religious liberty at odds with prevailing views of religious liberty designed to uphold liberal democracy. In particular, these representatives reject or question the Enlightenment's theory of "rights" language, and they challenge unwitting acceptance of the secular order and the "myth of neutrality."⁴¹ They warn that the theologically problematic bases of Western political order contain the seeds of its own undoing. Voices like Oliver O'Donovan treat the regime of liberal democracy with skepticism, believing that it nullifies the possibility of Christian social order.⁴² Rejecting

⁴¹So argues Jonathan Leeman: "The doctrine of religious freedom that, we said earlier, represents a consilience of Enlightenment and dissenting Protestant thought is precisely a formulation that depends on a view from nowhere. It stands here, of course, for the sake of public accessibility and in order to claim impartiality between competing religious demands. The trouble is, if there really is no such thing as a view from nowhere, and if the liberal doctrine of religious freedom continues to pretend standing there, "religious freedom" is not necessarily free. It is a way of cloaking the gods of the moment in the pretend garb of neutrality." Leeman, *Political Church*, 49. He attacks the very notion of a "publicly accessible" and "nonsectarian idea of 'freedom of conscience.'" To Leeman, such constructs that Christians rely on for their own religious liberty can easily be abused by ill-intentioned actors and immoral forces—and Leeman lists the Supreme Court as an example—of how "the right to define one's concept of existence" can just as well result in the right to abortion and same-sex marriage. *Ibid.*, 13. Leeman does defend a concept of religious liberty (one very much of the same type seen in VanDrunen's argument). A Christian doctrine of religious liberty can be located beginning with Gen 9. Reframing religious liberty as "religious tolerance" (a term not uncontroversial itself), Leeman argues that "God has not authorized any human beings to prosecute crimes against himself." *Ibid.*, 201-2. To summarize, God has not invested any governing authority with the ability to prosecute, correct, or condemn false religion or idolatry. This idea of "tolerance" that Leeman speaks of is not intended to denote a preference for any one religion; instead, as he argues, "tolerance" dispenses with the "nonsensical talk" about neutrality in favor of the theological proposition that all moral claims and worldviews are inherently religious.

⁴²While O'Donovan's project in *Desire of the Nations* does not address religious liberty qua religious liberty specifically, the modern notions of church-state relations and modern constructs of religious liberty as an inherently liberal-democratic are the very target of his project. O'Donovan casts suspicion about the modern idea of neutrality: "The peril of the Christendom idea—precisely the same peril that attends upon the post-Christendom idea of the religiously neutral state—was that of negative collusion: the pretense that there was now no further challenge to be issued to the rulers in the name of the ruling Christ." Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 213. For O'Donovan, that a nation might become Christian by no means ensures coercion. For him, society is contractually based on "deep social agreements" and where

“neutrality,” these voices reject Rawlsian liberalism’s emphasis on public accessibility and the freedom of conscience as self-authenticating goods accomplished apart from religious values.⁴³

Third, in contrast to the anti-modernists, principled pluralist evangelicals have struck a conciliatory tone on religious liberty by appealing to the common good on the grounds that liberal democracy offers a pathway for reconciling competing religious claims in society.⁴⁴ This conciliation is based not so much in pragmatism as a commitment to securing an ecology of freedom, of which religious liberty is central. In recognizing that no one religion can claim the mantle of social privilege over another, principled pluralists see religious liberty as reciprocal—to obtain religious liberty, one must extend religious liberty.⁴⁵ In short, these representatives have made their peace with liberal democracy and view religious liberty as a pathway for social stability amidst great social diversity.

these deep social agreements are “unreflected in government,” the inability to enact such agreements could serve to delegitimize the government. O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 222.

⁴³John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

⁴⁴Representative voices in this group include Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Understanding Liberal Democracy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. Terence Cuneo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); James W. Skillen, *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); Forster, *The Contested Public Square*. For example, Wolterstorff argues that a Christian account of religious liberty rests upon the idea that “authentic worship requires sincerity” (authenticity of worship). Emphasizing individual rights language, he argues additionally that “everyone has the natural right or duty to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience; accordingly, everyone should have the civil right to be free to do so” (natural rights and duties). Nicholas Wolterstorff, “A Christian Case for Religious Freedom,” in *Religious Freedom: Why Now? Defending an Embattled Human Right*, ed. Shah, 39. Skillen applies his pluralism to the area of religious liberty concretely by suggesting that it is incumbent for citizens who have a reverence for God’s omnipotence to act humbly by refusing to allow political communities to act omnipotently. Skillen, *Recharging the American Experiment*, 72.

⁴⁵Baptist ethicist Carl F. H. Henry offered comments resonant with this category. According to Henry, conservative Christianity’s track record of protecting religious liberty is not without its problems: The Religious Right eagerly appealed to religious liberty and increasingly declared it to be basic to all other human freedoms. Yet it specially invoked religious liberty to protest encroachments on evangelical freedom, and to advance legitimate evangelical concerns. But a disciplined public philosophy would stress religious freedom for all persons of whatever faith, as at the same time the best guarantee of religious liberty for Christians. Carl F. H. Henry, “The New Coalitions,” *Christianity Today*, November 17, 1989, 27.

Fourth, Christotelic pluralist evangelicals place priority on Jesus's kingship in the development of religious liberty. Russell Moore champions a kingdom of God-centered approach to religious liberty.⁴⁶ In *Onward*, Moore devotes a whole chapter to the subject of religious liberty. He notes the "question of religious liberty is, first and foremost, a question of the kingdom of God."⁴⁷ Moore draws on the themes of eschatology and kingship to approximate the ultimate responsibility of government this side of the eschaton and the ultimate destiny of humankind:

Those who would pretend to enforce the kingdom with tanks or guns or laws or edicts do not understand the nature of the kingdom Jesus preached. The risen Christ promised that the "one who conquers" will be given "authority over the nations and he will rule them as with a rod of iron" just as, Jesus said, "I have received authority from my Father" (Rev. 2: 27). The "conquering" here though is not about subduing enemies on the outside, but about holding fast to the gospel and following the discipleship of Jesus to the end (Rev. 2: 25–26). We are not yet kings over the world (1 Cor. 4: 8), but are instead ambassadors bearing persuasive witness to the kingdom we have entered (2 Cor. 5: 11, 20). This is not the time of rule, but the time of preparation to rule, as we, within the church, are formed and shaped into the kind of Christlike people who, at the resurrection, can sit with him upon the thrones of the cosmos (Luke 22: 24–28; Rev. 3: 21). The kingdom is not fully come until the last enemy, death, is fully conquered (1 Cor. 15: 24–28), and every occupied cemetery plot testifies that this moment has not yet come.⁴⁸

For Moore, ultimately, an emphasis on the kingdom of God places restrictions on the power of the state (it has term-limited and penultimate authority), helps locate where the rule of Christ is presently (the church), and marks out for whom the conscience is ultimately accountable (Christ). It is the proleptic nature of the "already" and "not yet" of the kingdom of God that gives space for insurrectionist claims of lordship to have temporary freedom. For Moore, Christ has not given authority to his church to assign

⁴⁶It is hardly surprising that Moore would anchor his views on religious liberty in the kingdom of God, which he believes is the center of theology and the key hermeneutical framework in Scripture. For more on Russell Moore and the kingdom of God, see Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004).

⁴⁷Russell D. Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 139.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 140–41.

ultimate judgment over presently rebellious consciences. The kingdom of God also enacts a mission for Christians to use the art of persuasion rather than coercion as the *modus operandi* for engagement. In short, the kingdom of God acts as a buttress against political utopias.⁴⁹ It also means that the state is minimally coercive because its role is not to enforce religious belief.⁵⁰

According to Christotelic pluralists, Jesus as king establishes him as the sole authority over the conscience.⁵¹ This position in many ways mimics and complements the position advanced in this dissertation. In fact, as the methodology section will state, one aspect of this dissertation is simply to synthesize and explicate existing arguments in greater detail and to connect them to larger themes relevant to biblical theology and religious liberty. One noted shortcoming for the Christotelic pluralist subset is that explanations for this category have been written for popular audiences and have not been given sustained treatment in academic scholarship.

What is of particular importance in this survey? No single-author volume mentioned offers a comprehensive account of religious liberty from within a confessionally evangelical perspective. The evidence suggests that religious liberty is of assumed importance to Christian social ethics, but lacks comprehensive explanation.

⁴⁹According to Moore, “Church/state separation means that the church does not bear Caesar’s sword in enforcing the gospel, and that Caesar’s sword is not to be wielded against the free consciences of persons made in the image of God,” Moore, *Onward*, 142. Undoubtedly, because the state is not possessed with ultimate power but only subordinate power this side of the eschaton, this entails that widely divergent values will interface in the public square and that the best one can hope for is a contested public square where the free market of ideas competes.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 145.

⁵¹In a commencement address at Wheaton College in 2002, in which the tragedy of September 11, 2001, was the context of his comments, John Piper sermonized on how Jesus Christ is the “End and Ground of Tolerance.” He commented, “Jesus Christ, the source and ground of all truth, will himself one day bring an end to all tolerance, and he alone will be exalted as the one and only Lord and Savior and Judge of the universe. Therefore, since Jesus Christ alone, the Creator and Lord of history, has the right to wield the tolerance-ending sword, we dare not.” John Piper, “Jesus Christ: The End and Ground of Tolerance,” *Desiring God*, May 12, 2002, accessed October 21, 2017, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/jesus-christ-the-end-and-ground-of-tolerance>.

Before stating my own approach, it is worth reviewing broad observations that emerge from the survey mentioned above that warrant the need for this dissertation.

First, there is need for greater biblical warrant. While various scholars make biblical arguments, the reality that no single volume from a confessionally evangelical perspective exists demonstrates the need for deliberate focus on providing a systematic treatment on the biblical basis for religious liberty.

Second, there is need for greater theological warrant. While religious liberty has been given theological treatment, it is often treated as an afterthought to a larger controlling motif. This dearth of resources, admittedly, is somewhat expected, though not excusable, considering that religious liberty qua religious liberty follows downstream from other important issues of systematic theology. For the sake of providing areas of development, however, it would be helpful if religious liberty was strengthened using the categories of, for example, the doctrine of God, theological anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology.

Third, there is need for a theological consensus. The criticism of this dissertation is not that religious liberty lacks any theological reflection or coherency, but that the disparate methodologies demonstrate that religious liberty lacks a coherent center or consensus on its identification, purpose, and intelligibility as a biblical and theological doctrine for social ethics.

Fourth, there is need to develop less anthropocentric paradigms for religious liberty. Religious liberty, if mentioned explicitly at all in evangelical social ethics, is primarily cast in anthropocentric categories. Accounts of religious liberty focus more heavily on the voluntary nature of faith and the innate worthiness of liberty as an end in itself. More specifically, religious liberty is made to be the focus of how disparate, diverse peoples can live together. This is not to say that the focus on this dimension is inherently problematic as much as it is a concern that themes such as Christology or the doctrine of God are noticeably lacking. If theocentric concerns are relegated to second

tier importance, it begs important questions about whether religious liberty can be coherently developed as a doctrine.

Fifth, and preeminently, there is great need to establish greater eschatological warrant and poise to religious liberty by situating it within the framework of inaugurated eschatology. A theological understanding of the secular, that is, an “intermediate and temporary realm in which human affairs unfold before the end” will establish the viability of religious liberty in an era where false religions and sinful ideologies cannot be subsequently eradicated by state power.⁵²

The distinctiveness of the approach offered in this dissertation is three-fold. First, this dissertation seeks to advance a comprehensive consensus around religious liberty grounded in central motifs in the Bible. This approach is absent in other scholarly works. While a dissertation cannot say everything on a subject, by situating religious liberty around the motifs of the kingdom of God, the image of God, and the mission of God, it sets the stage for developing a coherent framework through which to understand religious liberty’s intelligibility and conceptuality as a foundational component to evangelical social ethics. It is vital to situate religious liberty within redemptive history.

Second, it emphasizes Christology and eschatology as preeminent factors for the development of religious liberty. In traditional renderings of religious liberty, the discussion is typically abstracted from confessional elements such as Christology and eschatology. As previously noted, religious liberty is couched in heavily anthropocentric categories: The nature of authentic worship, free exercise, non-coercion, and the moral agency of humanity. Unfortunately, left undefined, these elements lack explicit Christotelic reference. Indeed, while Christian theorizing on religious liberty may at times overlap with other religious traditions on religious liberty, such theorizing is necessary, but it is not a sufficient condition for understanding religious liberty as authentically Christian.

⁵²Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 73.

Third, this dissertation is designed to offer a comprehensive framework that not only bolsters a Christian understanding of religious liberty, but also is designed to protect the religious liberty of non-Christian traditions within the public square. Hence, this dissertation has direct relevance to issues related to contemporary disputes to religious liberty in public policy within the public square.

Methodology

The following dissertation is a work of evangelical social ethics arguing for a comprehensive, and consensus, Christotelic framework for religious liberty around the motifs of the kingdom of God, the image of God, and the mission of God. This three-fold strategy is deliberate and based on a schematic framework seen in J. Budziszewski's *Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices on Political Thought and Action*.⁵³ Budziszewski says that any "adequate political theory" has at least three elements: (1) an orienting doctrine, "or a guide to thought;" (2) a practical doctrine, "or a guide to action;" and (3) a cultural apologetic, or "a guide to persuasion."⁵⁴ While this dissertation is not a work of political theory per se, Budziszewski's categories serve as a helpful pedagogical and heuristic framework that supports the method taken in this dissertation. This dissertation is arguing for a consensus framework; in doing so, it must be cognizant of how it is that a framework is developed and how such a framework supports the development of a consensus position.

The methodology employed in this dissertation argues that the kingdom of God is the orienting doctrine; the image of God is the practical doctrine; and the mission of God is the cultural apologetic. A brief note on the rationale for why I chose these themes to fit the corresponding category is in order.

⁵³J. Budziszewski, ed., *Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices on Political Thought and Action* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 18-19.

The kingdom of God functions as the orienting doctrine because it serves as the primary locus for guiding this dissertation's argument concerning religious liberty. Think of the orienting doctrine as the vertical relationship between God and humanity. The image of God functions as the practical doctrine because it offers guidance for understanding how religious liberty applies to persons in historical-political contexts. It would be helpful to think of the practical doctrine as the horizontal relationship between persons existing in community. Finally, the mission of God functions as the cultural apologetic because every field of action where religious liberty occurs is embedded in cultural matrixes that are either hospitable or inhospitable to religious liberty. Think of the cultural apologetic as the directional component of religious liberty that functions in society.

It is also worth noting that this dissertation interacts heavily with the work of David VanDrunen, Oliver O'Donovan, Robert Markus, and Jonathan Leeman. A brief word for why each is relied upon is necessary to explain my rationale for their use. First, VanDrunen is a noted scholar for his understanding of covenantal theology and social ethics. His understanding of the Bible's overall drama of redemption in relation to biblical epochs is helpful for understanding the relationship between political order and Christian mission. As a political theologian, Oliver O'Donovan offers dynamic insights on the authority of Christ's kingly reign in relationship to the political order. While I share no sympathies with his defense of Christendom, O'Donovan is at his best when infusing Christian political witness with the reality that Christ's kingship has real-world implications for how Christians understand political authority. Baptist theologian Jonathan Leeman, though still young in his career, offers a distinctly Baptist critique of the relationship between church and state, coupled with his own skepticism toward modernity and liberal democracy. While I do not share the full strength of Leeman's critiques toward liberal democracy, they are nonetheless helpful in chastening my own approach to religious liberty. Last, Augustine scholar Robert Markus' work on Augustine

remains deeply formative for my understanding of how religious liberty must be preeminently shaped by the reality of eschatology. Markus' understanding of history's desacrilization has also proven immensely helpful for understanding how to treat religious difference in the current age.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the dissertation and offers a brief survey and of contemporary approaches to religious liberty in evangelical scholarship. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 function thematically, which means each chapter will explore the intersection of their corresponding stool leg—kingdom of God, image of God, and mission of God. Chapter 5 will be evaluative in that it will seek to apply the framework against secular shortcomings and show why the proposal argued within this dissertation is a more attractive and sustainable foundation upon which to ground religious liberty. It will also provide the conclusion.

Since this dissertation encompasses broad theological categories, a wide collection of resources will be utilized. First, reliance upon Scripture as divinely inspired and inerrant will be the basis for formulating the thesis of this dissertation and will serve as both the authority and boundary for guiding the argument. It will also interact with scholarly monographs and journal articles from a wide array of disciplines, including biblical theology, biblical interpretation, social ethics, and to a lesser extent political philosophy and legal philosophy.

A word upfront is necessary about the type of argument being advanced in this dissertation. As I have told others in the development of this project, I am not seeking to write a dissertation that makes newfound arguments unheard of until this dissertation. Rather, this dissertation is one of arguing for consensus. Because the lack of consensus means there has been a lack of constructive proposals through which to understand religious liberty comprehensively, much of this dissertation means synthesizing existing arguments into a better conceptual framework. This dissertation aims to provide the connective tissue between interlinking ideas related to religious liberty that have

previously floated independently. I am attempting to take many existing arguments about religious liberty and unite them into a thematic system more amenable to evangelical thought. It is not the argument of this dissertation that evangelical scholarship has failed to reason or argue persuasively about religious liberty; it is rather, that religious liberty has not been given the sustained reflection, treatment, and the prominence it deserves as a crucial foundation to evangelical social ethics.

Though the scope of this dissertation is comprehensive in that it attempts to construct a comprehensive account for religious liberty from central biblical motifs, several limitations restrict all that could potentially be covered in a dissertation of this nature.

First, chapter 1 of this dissertation addresses contemporary proposals related to religious liberty. The rationale for restricting the focus to contemporary matters ought to be uncontroversial: It is simply not feasible to look at every single type of proposal made about religious liberty throughout church history. It is, however, incumbent upon me to be aware of historical arguments. And indeed, historical arguments will make their way into the constructive proposals put forth in chapters 2, 3, and 4. The brief literature survey previously discussed is intended to interact with proposals and sentiments directed at religious liberty from the 1990s onward. That time constraint is intentional insofar as to define the parameters of study.

Second, in the constructive chapters dealing with biblical motifs, it is outside the scope of the dissertation to provide thorough and elaborate biblical theologies of each motif on their own. The purpose of those chapters is to discern how those motifs interact and inform religious liberty.

Third, it is outside the purview of this dissertation to answer questions of how such a proposal fits extensively into conversation with such topics as Rawlsian liberalism, public reason, and public accessibility. Though these topics are discussed in brief, they merit independent study on their own.

Outline

Chapter 1 introduces the argument of the dissertation and establishes the rationale and justification of the dissertation. It explains from the outset that religious liberty is a neglected area of study in evangelical social ethics, and that rigorous, extended, and systematic study is absent in contemporary scholarly literature. It offers the thesis of the dissertation, which posits that a consensus around religious liberty ought to be based in the kingdom of God, the image of God, and the mission of God and that these components culminate in a Christotelic understanding of religious liberty. Chapter 1 also introduces the subject of religious liberty by evaluating it in light of current evangelical scholarship by surveying contemporary approaches to religious liberty. It organizes contemporary evangelical religious liberty scholarship using the categories of Christotelic pluralism, biblical pluralism, anti-modernist pluralism, and principled pluralism. It demonstrates that evangelical scholarship concerning religious liberty is plagued by a lack of consensus around religious liberty. Chapter 1 discusses what types of arguments must emerge that would help better ground an evangelical approach to religious liberty. Chapter 1 also explains the approach and methodology undertaken in the dissertation. It concludes by offering a summary of each chapter in the dissertation.

Chapter 2 focuses on how the kingdom of God shapes an understanding of religious liberty. It begins by establishing an understanding of how the kingdom of God functions in biblical theology. From there, chapter 2 examines how the theme of Christ as ultimate king establishes his authority over the conscience. Because Christ is king, he alone is sovereign over the conscience and has the ability to execute judgment over it. Additionally, this chapter examines the nature of salvation in relationship to religious liberty, arguing that the kingdom of God ushers its citizens into a kingly domain that demands higher obedience and authority than what the state can rightly demand. This chapter offers a biblical-theological explanation of how the kingdom of God shapes the jurisdiction, authority, and competence of the state over religious matters. A kingdom-focused view of religious liberty also helps establish the nature of the church as an

outpost of the kingdom of God. Finally, the eschatological reality of the kingdom of God's inauguration allows for a secular era of "contestability" between our current era and the consummation of history.

Chapter 3 investigates how the Christian doctrine of the image of God establishes religious liberty within the horizon of anthropology. The chapter begins by tracing an overview of how the image of God functions in biblical theology. The chapter argues that the image of God helps ground concepts central to discussions of religious liberty; namely, equality, freedom, and moral agency. A doctrine of the image of God holds humanity accountable to God's law through the operation of the rational conscience. This chapter argues that the image of God is the best foundation for establishing religious liberty as a human right because transcendent authority is the best cornerstone to secure religious liberty's inviolability. The chapter establishes how religious liberty undergirds basic elements of human experience such as the need to worship, to live authentically, and to live by an authority.

Chapter 4 examines how the Christian doctrine of the mission of God underscores the necessity of religious liberty because mission underlies the urgency of salvation. The chapter begins with a brief overview of a biblical theology of mission and argues that the post-resurrection biblical witness demands a broad conception of religious liberty in light of the current era of redemptive history. An evangelical social ethic of religious liberty helps establish the social conditions, moral ecology, and cultural milieu that allows the gospel to advance unhindered. An evangelical understanding of religious liberty prioritizes the freedom of conscience within the public square because it advances the common good in an era of contestability. Religious liberty also entails the opportunity for moral witness and moral reform to occur as a byproduct of the church's mission in society. Understood properly, a Christian understanding of mission fosters societal pluralism that makes non-coerced consciences capable of responding to the gospel.

Chapter 5 demonstrates that a secular commitment to religious liberty lacks the necessary public morality to protect dissenting viewpoints as is being seen in contemporary public policy and cultural conflicts. Moreover, it will emphasize that the framework advanced in the dissertation offers a pathway for Christians to engage within the public square. Chapter 5 offers a conclusion to the dissertation and summarizes the arguments of each chapter. It demonstrates why the preceding chapters formulate an evangelical consensus around religious liberty using the category of the kingdom of God, image of God, and mission of God. It concludes by suggesting other areas of additional research relevant to arguments within the dissertation.

In conclusion, this dissertation seeks to remedy a gap in evangelical academic literature surrounding the issue of religious liberty. It argues that religious liberty does indeed bear witness to evangelical hallmarks central to biblical theology and evangelical social ethics.

CHAPTER 2

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD: AN ESCHATOLOGICAL ACCOUNT

“And he has given him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of Man.”¹ These words spoken by Jesus in John 5:27 provide a foundation for the intersection between the kingdom of God and religious liberty. By virtue of Jesus’s kingship, he possesses sole, absolute authority to execute judgment over the conscience. In a striking Revolutionary War-era sermon that channels this theme of Christ’s kingship over the conscience, Elisha Williams inveighed against any authority that would usurp Christ as the Lord over the conscience. According to Williams,

[I]f Christ be the Lord of the conscience, the sole King in his own kingdom; then it will follow, that all such as in any manner or degree assume the power of directing and governing the consciences of men, are justly chargeable with invading his rightful dominion; He alone having the right they claim. Should the king of France take it into his head to prescribe laws to the subjects of the king of Great Britain; who would not say, it was an invasion of and insult offer’d to the British legislature.²

Williams’s remark offers a helpful starting point for relating the kingdom of God to religious liberty, and more thematically, to the eschatological foundation of a Christian understanding of religious liberty. Because Jesus Christ is the absolute Lord over the conscience, no human institution or individual can seek to usurp the role that is claimed by Jesus Christ. The concept which gives form to Christ’s Lordship over the conscience is the very notion of an imperium—a rule. In short, an imperium speaks to the idea of reign and authority—a kingdom. As Christians who believe that Jesus Christ is a

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the English Standard Version Bible.

²Elisha Williams, “The Essential Right and Liberties of Protestants 1744,” in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, ed. Sandoz Ellis, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), 66.

king, it is right and proper to speak of the reign of Jesus as enacting this imperium—a power to command. He possesses an authority and power to execute judgment over spheres that states or rulers do not have sanction over, namely, a person’s religious experience.

Cursory reading of the Bible reveals that it does not explicitly or neatly link the kingdom of God and religious liberty together. The Bible nowhere includes the phrase “religious liberty,” either.³ Rather, as I will argue in chapters 2 through 4, religious liberty is understood as a “derived”⁴ doctrine that is implied through the storyline of Scripture based on pre-existing doctrinal themes and how facets of these doctrines, properly understood, create and necessitate what would be referred to as a doctrine of religious liberty.⁵ It is worth stipulating that beginning with the kingdom of God as the foundation for religious liberty is intentional, because the kingdom of God is the primary, ultimate ground for a doctrine of religious liberty that is Christological and eschatological in nature. It thus functions as an “orienting doctrine” as mentioned in chapter 1.

It is worth briefly commenting on why religious liberty is nestled under the larger canopy of the relationship between church and state. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to set forth a vision for the kingdom of God that informs an understanding of the relationship between church and state that posits a doctrine of religious liberty.

³Baptist historian E. Glenn Hinson is correct to observe, “The Scriptures, even of the New Testament, do not lay down clear, explicit statements about religious liberty.” E. Glenn Hinson, *Religious Liberty: The Christian Roots of Our Fundamental Freedoms* (Louisville: Glad River, 1991), 11.

⁴Barrett Duke, “The Christian Doctrine of Religious Liberty,” in *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Liberty*, ed. Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B & H, 2016), 92.

⁵Luke Timothy Johnson has observed, “The Christian Scriptures, in short, do not in any direct or obvious way provide support for the contemporary proposition that ‘it is a human right to be religious.’” Luke Timothy Johnson, “Religious Rights and Christian Texts,” in *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective*, ed. John Witte, Jr., and Johan van der Vyver (The Hague: Martin Nijhoff, 1996), 66. Johnson’s comments serve as a reminder that religious liberty does require layers of theologizing and conceptualizing in order to be coherent. That something is not “obvious” or “direct” does not imply its absence in Scripture. If Johnson’s comments were applied to the word “Trinity,” Nicene Christianity itself would be under assault, yet theologians recognize a doctrine of the Trinity from biblical theology.

Religious liberty assumes a theory of church-state relationship, but the category of church-state relationship is broader than just religious liberty. It is the kingdom of God that sets the horizon for larger debates that encompass the proper relationship between church and state and their respective jurisdictions. As this chapter will argue, it is not the church versus the state that is preeminent in the development of a thoroughly Christian conception of religious liberty, but the nature of the kingdom being eternal and authorized by a sovereign Christ as distinct over a secular and penultimate age, an age that the Scriptures refer to as “passing away” and “evil” (1 Cor 2:6; Gal 1:4).

The purpose of this chapter is to set forth a paradigm that explains how and why the kingdom of God furnishes an eschatological foundation to the issue of religious liberty by establishing its shape (substance), duration (length), and boundaries (scope).⁶ As this chapter will argue, it is the kingdom of God that establishes the intelligibility, relevancy, and urgency of religious liberty to evangelical social ethics. Because Christianity teaches that history is advancing toward an ultimate conclusion evidenced by an inaugurated, though not-yet-consummated kingdom, what happens in the interim period between resurrection and consummation gives rise to the necessity of consciences responding freely to the gospel. The reality of a future kingdom poses the legitimacy of an era, an “eschatological gap,” wherein individuals are permitted to engage in false worship.⁷ But the reality of the kingdom’s presence, at least proleptically, is the guidepost

⁶Importantly, the purpose of this dissertation is to demonstrate how themes related to biblical theology (eschatology, anthropology, and soteriology) intersect with religious liberty for the sake of developing a robust evangelical social ethic. Readers should note that I have chosen to address more issues than focusing on fewer, going “wider” than “deeper.” This means, ostensibly, that I open myself up to the charge that the corresponding sections of each chapter are too brief, “thin,” or not sufficiently developed. I am aware of this potential concern. Again, it should be strenuously observed that the purpose of this dissertation, as stated in the prior chapter, is to provide the connective tissue that links religious liberty with each theme. I have chosen to address more topics rather than fewer in hopes of showing the scope of relevancy of religious liberty to the subset of issues that each chapter addresses.

⁷Robert A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 65.

that charts the church's response to religious diversity today. Yet, it is the reality of the kingdom's coming judgment that promises to interrogate and judge false belief at the conclusion of history. These truths find ultimate expression in the kingship of Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus's kingship and the uniting of all things in him (Eph 1:10), which authorizes his claim to execute ultimate judgment over the conscience (2 Cor 5:10), religious liberty lacks explicit Christocentric foundations, which is one of the animating concerns that this dissertation purports to address.⁸

This chapter will have seven essential aspects to its overall argument. First, an intentionally brief overview of how the kingdom of God functions in biblical theology will be offered. This will be done for definitional purposes only. Second, a biblical and theological explanation of Jesus's kingship in relationship to religious liberty will be established in order to demonstrate the accountability of the conscience to him and his authority over it. Third, this chapter will demonstrate that the ultimacy of the kingdom of God determines the jurisdiction and authority over penultimate realities, such as the state. This distinction will, importantly, give rise to a Christian doctrine of the secular, an often confused and criticized term in evangelical social ethics, but one nonetheless crucial to establishing an understanding of our current era of redemptive history and its authority over divine affairs.⁹ Fourth, and issuing closely from the previous point, a better paradigm exists, a paradigm which explains how the church understands its relationship to both ultimate and penultimate authorities at a time where the kingdom of God has been

⁸One is hard-pressed to locate theories of religious liberty that are inherently and intentionally Christological.

⁹For discussion on the concept of secularism in Christian thought, see Markus, *Christianity and Secular*; Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Michael Horton, "The Time Between: Redefining the 'Secular' in Contemporary Debate," in *After Modernity? Secularity, Globalization, and the Re-Enchantment of the World*, ed. James K. A. Smith (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 45-65; D. G. Hart, *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006); Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014), 349-64.

inaugurated, but not yet consummated. Fifth, as the sovereignty of the kingdom of God subjugates all earthly powers below it, this chapter will argue that the kingdom of God “stands in judgment upon every absolute identification of God with what is less than God (idolatry) and upon every human pretension of infallibility” and therefore requires the acknowledgment of epistemic humility on the part of government and other human beings.¹⁰ Sixth, this chapter will examine the soteriological component of religious liberty by arguing that individuals are accountable to Christ and his coming kingdom on their own individual basis, and thus, no mediators can attempt to plead on another’s behalf. Seen from this perspective, justification by faith assumes a doctrine of religious liberty. Lastly, the kingdom of God establishes the church as a distinct institution with a unique calling to bear witness to that kingdom. The manner in which that witness proceeds is contingent upon the church’s understanding itself as distinct from the world while also present within historical contexts that can, and indeed do, impact the church’s witness.

The Kingdom of God in Biblical Theology

The kingdom of God ought to be considered the central organizing principle in Scripture.¹¹ The kingdom of God is the unveiling of God’s purposes to install his Son,

¹⁰J. Philip Wogaman, *Protestant Faith and Religious Liberty* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967), 10.

¹¹According to Russell D. Moore, “Personal and Cosmic Eschatology,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 862,

The cosmic and covenantal aspects of biblical eschatology are realized through kingship—specially the establishment of the kingdom of God. Although the “kingdom of God” is not referenced by name in this way in the Old Testament, the concept is present throughout—a concept that Jesus and the apostles point to constantly in the New Testament. The kingdom of God is not seen in the Old Testament as simply the general sovereignty of God, although such divine kingship is everywhere affirmed (Ps 103:19, for example). The kingdom of God is instead the reason of God through his human mediator-king over a world in submission to his righteous rule.

For additional arguments that place the kingdom of God as the primary locus for the storyline of the Bible, see Russell Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004); Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006); Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Carl F. H. Henry,

Jesus Christ, as heir over all things (Eph 1:8-10; Col 1:15-20; Rev 11:15). The centrality of the kingdom of God to the overall narrative of Scripture cannot be overstated as it represents the “central message of Jesus” and represents the climactic revealing of history’s ultimate direction and purpose.¹²

The kingdom of God is God’s reign where Jesus sits as a sovereign king with all power, sovereignty, and authority.¹³ The kingdom is present where Jesus reigns. According to George Eldon Ladd, it is a present reality (Matt 12:28) and also a future blessing (1 Cor 15:50).¹⁴ It is also “the people belonging to a given realm.”¹⁵ The kingdom of God deals with the inner renewal that follows from experiencing salvation through Christ alone (Rom 14:17), but it is also the reign promising to impact the nations of the world as all powers and principalities are eventually subsumed under its authority (Matt 28:18-20; Rev 11:15).

The kingdom of God also refers to a people who belong to that realm. Today, that is the church—the redeemed of the ages from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Thus, the kingdom of God is bearing institutionalized witness in and through the church’s proclamation of the gospel and the formation of consciences within it. Jesus is ruling and currently reigning through his church and the church serves as an outpost or colony of

“Reflections on the Kingdom of God,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35, no. 1 (March 1992): 39-49; John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995); Wendell Willis, ed., *The Kingdom of God in 20th Century Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987); George Eldon Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Norman Perrin, *Parable and Gospel*, ed. K. C. Hanson, *Fortress Classics in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

¹²George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 54.

¹³Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 19-20.

¹⁴Ibid., 18. Ladd states further, “The Bible conceives of the entire sweep of human history as resting in the hand of God, but it looks for the final realization of God’s kingdom in a realm ‘beyond history,’ i.e., in a new and different order of existence.” Ibid., 24.

¹⁵Ibid., 19.

Christ's kingdom (Eph 1:20-23).¹⁶ Nowhere in Scripture is the kingdom of God identified as allied with state power; and neither is it identified as universally received in the present era of history. Rather the kingdom of God confronts the "thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities" with the message that their power is term-limited and passing away (Col 1:16).¹⁷ Thus, the kingdom of God has begun with the unveiling of Jesus's ministry, is born witness by the testimony of the church, but awaits climactic conclusion until God ushers in the end of history (1 Cor 15:20-28).

Of the socio-political implications for the kingdom of God, Baptist theologian and ethicist Russell Moore has argued for the centrality of kingdom eschatology through the prism of "already/not yet" as the foundation for a renewed evangelical engagement in the public square because it militates against fundamentalist withdrawal and protestant liberalism's identification of the present social order with the kingdom itself.¹⁸ In Moore's framework, the kingdom has been enacted since the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but not yet consummated in full where Jesus reigns over all earthly kingdoms. Another evangelical ethicist, Carl F. H. Henry said this about the kingdom of God,

The future is actually already at hand, and is unfolding within man's present earthly existence: the incarnation of Christ inaugurated God's kingdom, the resurrection of Christ publicly identified him as the future judge of the human race, and the present church has initiated 'the last days' (Heb 1:3); the final consummation of all things is imminent.¹⁹

¹⁶Ladd makes a helpful clarification: "The church is the people of the Kingdom but cannot be identified with the Kingdom." Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 55. This definition stands in contrast to the view of the Reformers, which identified the church as the kingdom.

¹⁷For an in-depth study of the purpose and scope of state power in the New Testament, see Oscar Cullmann, *The State in The New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner Sons, 1956).

¹⁸Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*.

¹⁹Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority: God Who Speaks and Shows, Fifteen Theses*, pt. 3, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 4:612.

This framework of Moore and Henry serves as the foundation for the position argued in this dissertation. Building off the eschatological framework of Carl F. H.

Henry's manifesto in *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, Moore argues,

The eschatological futurism of evangelicalism, Henry argued, would ensure not only that existing structures were not given the uncritical imprimatur of the kingdom of God, but also that Christianity would not succumb to the Constantinian temptation to Christianize forcibly any political order.²⁰

The framework of inaugurated eschatology supplies the framework for the viewpoint argued in this dissertation because it provides a forward-looking promise of eschatological judgment without confusing the role of the church with the role of the state. Moreover, because the kingdom of God is given witness through the testimony of the church, the church can never be coterminous with the operations of the state, nor can the church insist upon a totalized Christian social order short of Christ himself enacting his fully realized reign. All of these realities—present reality, coming judgment, institutionalized church witness—bear enormous consequence on forming a doctrine of religious liberty rooted in the kingdom of God.

The Kingship of Christ and Religious Liberty: A Christotelic Argument from Judgment

The kingdom of God denotes the authority of Jesus Christ as a king. While that sentence might appear needlessly self-referential and obvious, the theme of kingship denotes the primary foundation for establishing a doctrine of religious liberty. The New Testament is replete with examples of Jesus and his apostles attesting to his kingship (Matt 25:34; John 12:12-15; Acts 17:7; Phil 2:9-11; Heb 1:8-9). But what is kingship apart from the king's ability to render just, final judgment? Edmund Clowney observes that "The God-man is Lord of all: his salvation brings judgment as well as redemption (Ps 96:13; John 5:21); his rule in heaven now governs all creation, and he will put down

²⁰Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*, 29.

all evil forever (1 Cor 15:24-28; Heb 1:4; Col 2:15; Phil 2:9-11).”²¹ It is precisely because Jesus is an ultimate judge that humans and human institutions cannot be the judge of erring consciences over religious matters, which are the sole domain of Jesus (Heb 9:27). Nowhere in the developing saga of the New Testament is the conscience held to ultimate account except before God.

However, this reality poses larger questions central to this dissertation’s main argument. How does Jesus’s kingship act in such a way to promote religious liberty, pluralism, or the authorization of religious diversity? Using “tolerance” as the semantic equivalent for religious liberty, Reformed theologian John Piper has advanced a provocative thesis that Jesus is both the source of tolerance and the end of tolerance. Not known primarily as a public theologian nor an advocate for religious liberty more popularly, Piper’s religious liberty framing is particularly useful in developing a theocentric and Christocentric understanding of religious liberty. Citing 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10,²² Piper promotes the thesis that Jesus’s eternal judgment produces a time-limited tolerance for the penultimate age:

Jesus Christ, the source and ground of all truth, will himself one day bring an end to all tolerance, and he alone will be exalted as the one and only Lord and Savior and Judge of the universe. Therefore, since Jesus Christ alone, the Creator and Lord of history, has the right to wield the tolerance-ending sword, we dare not. . . . Or, to put it most radically and most violently—and most Biblically—since the wrath of Jesus will consign to everlasting punishment all who do not obey the gospel, therefore we must give place to wrath, and love our enemies. Since Christ alone, crucified-for-sinners, has the final right to kill his religious enemies, therefore Christianity will spread not by killing for Christ, but by dying with Christ—that others might live. The final triumph of the crucified Christ is a call to patient suffering, not political success.²³

²¹Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995), 188.

²²Second Thess 1:7-10 reads, “[W]hen the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his might angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.”

²³Regrettably, Piper’s comments are made in a blog post, rather than in an academic volume. John Piper, “Jesus Christ: The End and Ground of Tolerance,” *Desiring God*, May 12, 2002, accessed

Piper's characterization is correct. The ability for Christ to execute judgment over false belief is bound up, uniquely and exclusively, with his authority granted to him as king and Lord. What Piper's argument also correctly captures as a consequence is that if Jesus is assigned the responsibility to bring false belief to an end, it removes that responsibility from other sources that are not Christic in nature and not authorized with that adjudicating authority. The role of Christ as king thus sets up an impenetrable division of authority, wherein the kingdoms of the world are subjugated to the eternal judgment of Christ's kingship (Rev 1:5). Piper avers that because judgment is final and ultimate, tolerance, and by extension, religious liberty, are not eternal goods that last into the eschaton. Religious liberty must not be absolutized beyond the bounds of its limited purpose. Thus, the eternal reality of judgment makes room for false belief in the present era of history.

While the issue of pluralism will be dealt with in chapter 4 in greater detail, Piper's Christological foundation for religious liberty forms the basis for a doctrine of pluralism.²⁴ There, Piper argues the spiritual nature of the kingdom of God prevents any form of religious coercion: "God himself is the foundation for our commitment to a pluralistic democratic order—not because pluralism is his ultimate ideal, but because in a fallen world, legal coercion will not produce the kingdom of God."²⁵

October 21, 2017, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/jesus-christ-the-end-and-ground-of-tolerance>.

²⁴Sander Griffioen and Richard Mouw makes a similar argument in their taxonomy of pluralism. In commenting on what they call "directional pluralism," which refers to the notion of diverse religions coexisting in society, they write on the reality of judgment being in view when Christians discuss pluralism: "In emphasizing the importance of dialogue we do not mean to divert attention from the moral painful dimensions of directional pluralism. As we have already stated, a theocentric position treats all our human points of view as ultimately accountable to divine authority." Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 109.

²⁵John Piper, "Making Room for Atheism," *Desiring God*, August 10, 2005, accessed October 21, 2017, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/making-room-for-atheism>.

S. M. Hutchens has advanced a similar theme, grounding his doctrine of religious liberty in “divine forbearance.”²⁶ Arguing from teleology, Hutchens, like Piper, works back to a foundation for religious liberty. “Toleration” results from awaiting “condemnation and judgment.”²⁷ He therefore rejects any “rights”-based language associated with religious liberty for fear of ennobling the idea that those in sin and error possess positive rights. He writes, “The time given in which no action is taken in judgment must be regarded as a limited period of grace, and is never a ‘right.’”²⁸

Baptist historian Jason Duesing has likewise connected the reality and authority of Jesus’s kingship with its implications for religious liberty. Commenting on how salvation is already and not yet according to the New Testament, the reality that all persons will eventually bow their knee to Christ (Phil 2:9-11) means a “future day is coming when the name of Jesus will go forth and all creatures will bow and confess him as Lord.”²⁹ The implication, according to Duesing, is that religious liberty exists within a defined era, and that knowledge of Christ’s certain return and impending judgment “should serve as a warning to all outside of Christ that freedom to worship other gods without the judgment of the one true God will come to an end.”³⁰

Russell Moore also champions a kingdom of God-centered approach to religious liberty. In a popularly-written volume, *Onward*, Moore devotes a whole chapter to the subject of religious liberty. He notes that the “question of religious liberty is, first

²⁶S. M. Hutchens, “Toleration and Divine Forbearance,” *Touchstone* 29, no. 4 (August 2016): 33-36.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 33.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Jason G. Duesing, “The End of Religious Liberty,” in Duesing, White, and Yarnell, *First Freedom*, 251.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 255.

and foremost, a question of the kingdom of God.”³¹ Moore draws on the themes of eschatology and kingship to approximate the shape of religious liberty in the current era of history:

Those who would pretend to enforce the kingdom with tanks or guns or laws or edicts do not understand the nature of the kingdom Jesus preached. The risen Christ promised that the “one who conquers” will be given “authority over the nations and he will rule them as with a rod of iron” just as, Jesus said, “I have received authority from my Father” (Rev. 2: 27). The “conquering” here though is not about subduing enemies on the outside, but about holding fast to the gospel and following the discipleship of Jesus to the end (Rev. 2: 25– 26). We are not yet kings over the world (1 Cor. 4: 8), but are instead ambassadors bearing persuasive witness to the kingdom we have entered (2 Cor. 5: 11, 20). This is not the time of rule, but the time of preparation to rule, as we, within the church, are formed and shaped into the kind of Christlike people who, at the resurrection, can sit with him upon the thrones of the cosmos (Luke 22: 24– 28; Rev. 3: 21). The kingdom is not fully come until the last enemy, death, is fully conquered (1 Cor. 15: 24– 28), and every occupied cemetery plot testifies that this moment has not yet come.³²

For Moore, the ontology of the kingdom of God assumes a doctrine of religious liberty if religious liberty is defined as the ability for individuals to respond to the gospel apart from outside influence or coercion. An emphasis on the eternality and finality of the kingdom of God places restrictions on the power of the state (it has term-limited and penultimate authority), helps locate where the rule of Christ is presently manifest (the church), determines the method of evangelistic witness (persuasion), and marks out for whom the conscience is ultimately accountable (Christ). It is the proleptic nature of the “already” and “not yet” of the kingdom of God that gives space for insurrectionist claims of lordship to have temporary freedom.

Religious liberty is therefore a concept that gives biblical shape to the present reality that not all has yet been brought under the reign of Christ (1 Cor 15:28). Religious liberty exists because the kingdom of God’s retribution awaits. Elsewhere, Moore argues that the interim era of the passing age represents a “temporary suspension of doom. After

³¹Russell D. Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 139.

³²*Ibid.*, 140-41.

this, the grace of God is not extended—only his justice, and that with severity.”³³ For Moore, Christ has not given authority to his church to assign ultimate judgment over presently rebellious consciences nor is that enacted through the state. The kingdom of God also enacts a mission for Christians to use the art of persuasion rather than coercion as the method for engagement. The kingdom of God thus acts as a buttress against religious and political utopias.³⁴ It also means that the state is religiously non-preferential because its role is not to enforce and or referee religious belief.³⁵

On these grounds, a Christian doctrine of religious liberty emerges in the context of Jesus’s kingship. By putting absolute judgment within the realm of the ultimate (the kingdom of God)—not the penultimate—Christians can make room for dissenting, false belief. This is due to neither convenience nor concession, but is of theological principle following from the reality of inaugurated eschatology. Christians do not think dissenting belief shares equal merit with biblical orthodoxy, but rather they believe that judging, ending, and redressing all erroneous belief cannot be achieved fully either in present form or by human hands. That judgment is reserved exclusively for God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and the kingdom he has inaugurated, but that awaits

³³Moore, “Personal and Cosmic Eschatology,” 899.

³⁴According to Moore, *Onward*, 142, “Church/state separation means that the church does not bear Caesar’s sword in enforcing the gospel, and that Caesar’s sword is not to be wielded against the free consciences of persons made in the image of God.” Undoubtedly, because the state is not possessed with ultimate power but only subordinate power this side of the eschaton, this entails that widely divergent values will interface in the public square and that the best one can hope for is a contested public square where the free market of ideas compete. Interestingly, Glenn Moots makes a provocative argument that the theme of eschatology dictates every belief system’s hospitality toward religious liberty. According to Glenn A. Moots, *Politics Reformed: The Anglo-American Legacy of Covenant Theology* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2010), 10,

Among the most important reasons that modern political theories come into conflict with political theology is that many modern philosophers offer an eschaton which competes with the biblical eschaton. . . . Some modern philosophers direct their political prescription toward some future event of ultimate significance, trying to hasten its arrival by human action. By politics, they hope to bring heaven or utopia to earth.

The competing conceptions of various eschatons determine whether a principled defense of religious difference will be tolerated.

³⁵Moore, *Onward*, 145.

consummation. Consider the apostle Paul's comments on the accountability of the conscience in light of previous statements:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31).

As Paul's words reveal, the present era of humanity's ignorance will not be left unchecked. Instead, by appointing Jesus Christ as a sovereign and resurrected king, God has given Jesus the ability to judge the world "in righteousness." The importance of exclusive judgment being authorized by virtue of Jesus's resurrection is central to solidifying the intelligibility of religious liberty's association with Christology.

By looking to the kingdom such that the kingdom shapes the perspective of present temporal affairs, Christians know where the arc of history bends and how erring ideologies will be sorted. Christian social ethics can allow the erring ideologies of the present to contest and contend with the claims of Christ because Christianity's patience with unbelieving populations and false religions is based upon its Christ's promise of perfect justice. On the subject of believers and unbelievers coexisting together in the present age, Baptist ethicist Evan Lenow finds the parable of the Wheat and Tares (Matt 13:24-30) illustrative in demonstrating that future judgment prevents coercive action in the present: "True judgment is left up to God. It is not the job of the government to judge and remove these people for their unbelief. God will judge them, and his judgment is final."³⁶ Because sorting out the wheat from the tares belongs to God exclusively, "Jesus was apparently taking a position against coercion in matters of religious conscience. Discernment is the responsibility of the church, but judgment belongs only to God."³⁷

³⁶Evan Lenow, "Religious Liberty and the Gospel," in Duesing, White, and Yarnell, *First Freedom*, 115.

³⁷Paige Patterson, "Mutually Exclusive or Biblically Harmonious? Religious Liberty and Exclusivity of Salvation in Jesus Christ," in *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Liberty*, ed. Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 36. On the use of the Wheat and Tares parable in church history related to religious liberty and religious coercion, see

The promise of sorting the wheat from the tares is the assurance of impending judgment.³⁸

Though not an orthodox Christian, John Locke presented a similar argument for religious liberty on the grounds of judgment. Locke deferred to Jesus Christ for the ultimate decision demarcating heresy from orthodoxy or true religion from false religion. Since that decision rests outside the hands of government or of individuals, a level of humility and fallibility ought to encourage individuals from enacting a measure of divine judgment on one another concerning religious affairs within the civil domain: “The Decision of that Question belongs only to the Supreme Judge of all men, to whom also alone belongs the Punishment of the Erroneous.”³⁹

By refusing to immanentize the eschaton and bring history’s future judgment into the present, Christians can extend a maximal account of religious liberty to their unbelieving neighbors with whom they disagree about religious affairs. Religious liberty, therefore, is not a political idea searching for religious justification. Rather, evidenced from the Christotelic argument put forth in this section, religious liberty is rooted in the very nature of Christ’s kingship and sovereignty. However, this is possible only if history is judged by the promise of a coming kingdom.

This framework leads ultimately to the superiority of the Christian account of religious liberty and its feasibility for fostering an ecology of religious liberty contra milieus that lack an understanding of transcendent accountability and judgment. These

Hinson, *Religious Liberty*, 28-32.

³⁸For more on the parable of the Wheat and Tares, see David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 343-44; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 355-58; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 385-90; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 218-20.

³⁹John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. James H. Tully (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983), 32.

are the prongs to this paradigm: (1) The kingdom of God establishes that absolute judgment is real and final; (2) The absolute judgment of the kingdom of God does not belong to present human institutions (i.e., government); (3) Absolute judgment belongs to God mediated through the rule of Christ; (4) Absolute judgment occurs at the end of history and cannot be achieved in the present, temporal realm of human affairs.

Judgment and Contestability: The Kingdom of God and the Christian Doctrine of the Secular

More must be said about the intervening period of time between Jesus's resurrection and the consummation of history for the framework advanced here concerning religious liberty. If the kingdom of God establishes the inevitability of final judgment, what does that mean for the intervening or interim period—an “eschatological gap”⁴⁰—of history grounded in a biblical-theological view of history? Over what present jurisdiction does the state have affirmative judgment?

While the last section focused more heavily on the nature of Christ's kingship, the purpose of this section is to understand the relationship between the kingdom of God, the jurisdiction of judgment God assigns to present, temporal institutions, and the era of time within which the church presently operates. It will show the kingdom of God gives shape to forms of judgment that are legitimate when pursued correctly and illegitimate for the state to pursue in a secular era. Secondly, a secular age of contestability furnishes an era where ideas, religions, and ideologies competing for acceptance is warranted from Scripture.

Jonathan Leeman and “Religious Tolerance”

While critical of modern liberal democratic conceptions of religious liberty as “freedom of conscience,” Baptist theologian Jonathan Leeman offers a helpful

⁴⁰Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 15.

contribution for a distinctly Christian rendering of religious liberty that takes seriously the current epoch of humanity.⁴¹ Leeman traces a doctrine of “religious tolerance” back to Genesis.⁴² By virtue of the Noahic covenant’s reconstitution of the social order in Genesis 9, Leeman argues persuasively that “God has not authorized human beings to prosecute crimes against himself.”⁴³ What this means, practically speaking, is that only forms of worship that physically harm other persons should be punished in light of the minimalistic legal order God posits in Genesis 9:5-7. What God establishes in Genesis 9 is a justice system meant only to redress and mediate interpersonal wrongs. Thus, Leeman’s paradigm offers the possibility of rooting religious liberty within a doctrine of God, while grounded in biblical eschatology advanced through the development of covenantal theology. Leeman writes,

The God of the Bible gives governments authority to prosecute crimes against human beings, not the authority to prosecute crimes against himself. So long as people remain unharmed, false religion should be tolerated publicly and privately. This is the call to free exercise.⁴⁴

⁴¹Leeman argues against the “freedom of conscience” in liberal usage because it “demands too much for the conscience and too little by way of foundations. Christians will like what it produces only when the vast majority of citizens inhabit a broadly Christian value system.” Jonathan Leeman, *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ’s Rule* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2016), 90-91. He accuses the freedom of conscience as being a “tautology of respecting consciences for the sake of respecting consciences.” Ibid., 201. Leeman prefers the controversial “religious tolerance” instead of “freedom of conscience” because in his view, religious neutrality is impossible. The public square, in his view, is a battleground of competing gods, and at best, what society can hope for is a mutual non-aggression compact between competing religions. Ibid., 202.

⁴²I strongly discourage the use of the phrase “religious tolerance” even if it means something different than its historical connotations would imply. “Religious tolerance” problematically denotes a historic period when political communities gave religious privilege to certain religious sects, while extending mere “tolerance” to religious minorities. This act ends up socially disfavoring individuals on the grounds of their religious convictions, which I ardently reject. For an excellent overview of the problems of “religious toleration,” see Greg Forster, *The Contested Public Square: The Crisis of Christianity and Politics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 162-65.

⁴³Leeman, *Political Church*, 201. As previously stated, Leeman is at pains to argue that Christians should not emphasize the freedom of conscience as the foundation for a doctrine of religious liberty. For Leeman, the emphasis for any concept of religious freedom must lie most heavily with the responsibility of man to God, as God demands to be worshipped. From this viewpoint, Leeman’s approach is theocentric in nature.

⁴⁴Ibid., 204.

Deductively, this grants the notion of religious liberty. If it is not within the purview of the state's pursuit of justice to adjudicate religious claims between humanity and God, the state lacks the oversight to referee such affairs. Leeman's overture to "authority" complements the limited jurisdiction that the state oversees: to administer law and adjudicate claims between persons, not between persons and God. In Leeman's framework, he makes clear that there are areas of thought and belief to which the state cannot lay claim and determining true or false belief in God is one of them. Because God has not established civil order to adjudicate false worship, false worship is to be tolerated, and thus, a doctrine of religious liberty emerges.

The canopy of Genesis 9 and the Noahic covenant is relevant to this discussion because it serves as a precursor and backdrop to the kingdom of God's jurisdiction in the drama of redemption. As the kingdom of God establishes the demarcations of what is eligible for judgment, it also establishes what is not eligible for judgment; namely, that lesser authorities have neither authority nor competence in adjudicating theological matters between competing religions. Leeman's argument relies on the implicit assumption that only God retains the ability to execute perfect judgment against false religion or erring belief. The explanation of Genesis 9 complements the promise of future kingdom judgment begun at the dawn of Christ's ministry, yet awaiting final enactment.

Importantly, in grounding this doctrine of "religious tolerance" in Genesis, Leeman also appeals to the authority of Christ's kingdom, which is given present institutional authority in the local church. Hence, Leeman's emphasis on the "keys of the kingdom" as the cipher that unlocks the political orientation of the local church also provides a crucial insight into limiting the authority of the state over religious affairs.⁴⁵

⁴⁵Leeman, *Political Church*, 372, "The institutional church, not the state, possesses the authority to formally distinguish true from false doctrine, and true believers from unbelievers. The church alone has the authority to formally name the things of God, whether doctrine or people."

What matters for the sake of argument is that Leeman's recognition of a dividing line in where God holds the conscience accountable illustrates that the present era of time, since the establishment of the Noahic covenant onward to the present age of Christ ruling through his church, grants the reality of erring religious consciences being free from government penalty. Thus, while Leeman objects to the division of "religion" from "politics," he does forge a helpful division between the realms of the conscience's accountability and the state's jurisdiction.⁴⁶

David VanDrunen

David VanDrunen's argument for religious liberty bears almost exact resemblance to Jonathan Leeman, except VanDrunen's argument is more exegetically grounded. Leeman in fact draws from VanDrunen's argument about the "Politics of the Fall."⁴⁷ Appealing to the Noahic covenant and a biblically-based system of natural law,⁴⁸ VanDrunen observes that "God established the Noahic covenant with the entire human race and gave no religious qualification for participation in its blessings and activities."⁴⁹ This supposition leaves VanDrunen with the implication that his natural law theology "implies the propriety of recognizing a right to religious freedom."⁵⁰ It is worth noting that VanDrunen's characterization of religious freedom is less a positive good to be celebrated, and more an implication of his theological program, and therefore a "modest

⁴⁶For a recounting of Leeman's criticisms of liberal democracy's formulations of religious liberty, see Leeman *Political Church*, 86-94.

⁴⁷For a review of Leeman's interactions with VanDrunen, see Leeman, *Political Church*, 172-98.

⁴⁸For a summary of VanDrunen's argument, see David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 205, 480-87, 509.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 131.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 506.

appreciation” is rendered for liberal notions of religious freedom and secularism while also opposing what the two advocate in their more extreme forms.⁵¹

The universal scope of the Noahic covenant is important, but perhaps more important to the argument for religious liberty being made here, is the silence of the Noahic covenant over matters related to penalties for false worship. Because the Noahic covenant is designed to providentially sustain social order through cultural and political institutions that make life and society manageable, VanDrunen argues that the neglect of penalty for false worship at the re-constitution of the social order offers a “crucial” biblical-theological foundation for religious freedom. VanDrunen writes,

If God called all human beings generally to the pursuit of procreation, eating, and justice (and whatever other obligations this covenant entails), without excluding people for reason of religious profession, then excluding people for this reason is inherently problematic. Also significant is how Genesis 9:6 commands the pursuit of justice and authorizes the use of coercion through the *lex talionis*, which concerns *intrahuman* disputes and the injuries one person inflicts upon another. It does not speak of human beings prosecuting each other for wrongs inflicted upon God. Therefore, to prohibit a person from engaging in a particular kind of religious practice, which does not injure another person but allegedly injured God, seems to transgress the boundaries of rightful human authority under the Noahic covenant.⁵²

There is thus a two-fold purpose for religious liberty from VanDrunen’s vantage point.⁵³ First, God did not intend to endow earthly governments with the authority or jurisdiction to prosecute crimes against him. Also, according to VanDrunen, religious liberty is primarily aimed at the preservation of society. It functions downstream from God’s command for intra-human justice: “God delegates to human beings the authority to

⁵¹VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, 506.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 131-32.

⁵³It is worth mentioning that Leeman’s account of religious liberty is starkly more pessimistic than VanDrunen’s. VanDrunen’s account does not build upon the more sophisticated theological analysis of the problems of liberal democracy that Leeman’s does. This optimism is where VanDrunen’s analysis proves more helpful than Leeman’s analysis. Because VanDrunen sees religious diversity as an accurate, normative expression of this era’s state of affairs, it casts religious pluralism in a much more positive light than does Leeman’s characterization. Leeman’s characterizing of religious pluralism denotes a level of dour cynicism about the possibility of attaining actual pluralism.

impose punishments for wrongs insofar as they are injuries inflicted upon each other.”⁵⁴ Religious liberty thus “keeps the peace,” as a function of common grace.⁵⁵ VanDrunen believes that there is no “ultimate” right to religious freedom, but only a penultimate right before fellow humans instituted by God, because, ultimately, the arc of history will culminate in Christ judging all false gods and ideologies that do not confess him as king.⁵⁶ But, VanDrunen concedes that there is a “penultimate natural law right to religious freedom before fellow human beings, and this right is granted by God.”⁵⁷ This right underlies the legitimacy and importance of enshrining a right to religious liberty amongst fellow human beings, and by extension, the political institutions they form. Offering a summary of his argument, VanDrunen states,

The implication for the question of religious freedom is simple, but deeply significant. The simple implication is this: If God has called the entire human race (regardless of religious identification) to participate in the cultural life of society while he preserves this present world, then no human being has the authority to exclude other human beings from full participation because of their religious profession or practice. The covenant with Noah is a common grace *blessing of God* (Gen 9:1). Therefore the minimalist natural law ethic concerning procreation, eating, and justice (9:1-7) does not merely involve obligations but also a privilege that God grants to all people to be active members of civil society—and this despite the ongoing blight of human sin (8:21) and the specter of a final judgment in the distant future. Since God blesses

⁵⁴VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, 508.

⁵⁵The theme of common grace and religious liberty is explored in chap. 4 of this dissertation.

⁵⁶Citing Rom 1:21-23, VanDrunen argues that there is no “ultimate natural law right to religious liberty.” Instead, VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, 506, states, “These verses indicate that human beings have no ultimate natural law right to religious freedom before God. No human being can stand before God and claim the right to be religious or commune with the divine in whatever way she chooses. Rather, natural law requires each person to worship the one true God—the creator of heaven and earth—and to worship him properly. This notion leads VanDrunen to criticize the work of natural lawyers such as Robert George whom VanDrunen accuses of too cheerfully characterizing the contributions of other religions. On George’s work, VanDrunen rejects that natural law posits an irreducible good from the contribution of other religion; as he states, “Natural law, in Romans, does not lead humanity down the road to spiritual enlightenment and nobility, but makes condemnation before God more plain.” Ibid., 507. Again, VanDrunen writes, “I conclude that human beings do not have an ultimate natural law right to religious freedom before God. God holds all people accountable for serving him properly, and by the light of nature alone all people know who God is but respond to him sinfully, a condition rectified only through Christian faith.” Ibid., 507.

⁵⁷Ibid., 508.

people with these privileges without respect to religious profession, if a human being strips another human being of these privileges because of religious profession, he defies the post-fall natural order established by God.⁵⁸

VanDrunen and Leeman offer some of the most unique, trenchant, and substantive biblical-theological formulations for grounding religious liberty in contemporary social ethics. Perhaps most rewarding, both authors establish religious liberty as a biblically sanctioned function of the social order rooted in a re-constituted creational order. Creatively, they do so by making religious liberty a function of postdiluvian creation ordinances, but also in light of the unfolding of biblical history. To be sure, their arguments are not palatable to the ears of liberal democracy, but their ideas and the maximal account of freedom extended bears a conceptual equivalent to the likes of what liberal democracy would attempt to offer. Indeed, the paradigm offered by Leeman and VanDrunen may provide a more lasting framework for religious liberty than that of liberal democracy may offer in the long-term.⁵⁹

Their work also helpfully affirms the distinction in realms of authority and judgment, which will be developed more fully in the next section. And in keeping with the kingdom-centered theme that this chapter is advancing, it is the kingdom of God that acts as a foil or backdrop for how both authors understand the purpose and ultimate place of religious liberty in biblical theology in light of the New Testament witness.

Finally, both Leeman and VanDrunen's arguments bear witness to the "already/not yet" nature of the kingdom of God. Because the kingdom of God awaits fulfillment and final judgment has not been rendered, the argument of Genesis 9 that allows religious diversity without exclusion or penalty remains enduring in the present.

⁵⁸VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, 508.

⁵⁹One of the shortcomings of both VanDrunen and Leeman's arguments is that both downplay the relationship of their views on religious liberty to the ministry of Jesus Christ and the rest of the New Testament. Both problematically link religious liberty exclusively to the Old Testament alone and fail to situate religious liberty within the horizon of Jesus' coming judgment.

Leeman and VanDrunen's arguments serve as a reminder that it is not the job of humans or governments to punish individuals for false belief.

Robert Markus and the Secular

Augustinian scholar Robert Markus⁶⁰ has put forward a provocative thesis that Christianity, and specifically, Augustine, are singularly responsible for the development of a concept of the secular.⁶¹ And I will argue, a doctrine of the secular (a penultimate age) is only discernable by appeal to an eternal, ultimate age (the kingdom of God).

This concept of the secular supplies the needed building block to not only understand the different realms to which the conscience is accountable, but it also gives eschatological poise to the expectation of wrong belief in a penultimate age.⁶² It is one thing to say that Christians should expect erring beliefs to exist; a doctrine of the secular, however, sees the reality of erring beliefs as an expected, but lamentable component to the present age and a forewarning of coming judgment.

But first, a proper definition of the secular is necessary in order to make sense of the overall argument. By "secular," I am not referring to broader trends within progressivism and liberalism that attempt to harass and marginalize religious belief or appeals to religious motivation from the public square, such that the public square becomes "naked."⁶³ Rather, in keeping with the historical definition, and Markus's

⁶⁰For what is regarded as a classic text in the political theology of Augustine, see Markus, *Saeculum*.

⁶¹Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 4-5.

⁶²Oliver O'Donovan argues, "The Christian conception of the 'secularity' of political society arose directly out of this Jewish wrestling with unfulfilled promise," and that "secularity is irreducibly an eschatological notion; it requires an eschatological faith to sustain it, a belief in a disclosure that is 'not yet.'" Oliver O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 24.

⁶³For discussion on the impact of secularist attempts to banish religion from public discourse, see Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

summary of Augustine's view, secularism is rooted in the saeculum, which is "that intermediate and temporary realm in which human affairs unfold before the end."⁶⁴ Or as VanDrunen himself defines secularism, it is an "age preceding the second coming of Christ" or "the life of this present age that is distinct from the life of the age to come in the new creation" that authorizes a "common social space."⁶⁵ Notably, in keeping with the eschatological focus of this chapter, Michael Horton argues that secularism is defined by "God's different covenantal relationships in different epochs of redemptive history."⁶⁶ He further elucidates how the secular age is not "nontheological" but is rather a "time in which cult and culture have not yet been reunited" and "creation, providence, and common grace" sustain it.⁶⁷

Markus posits that the ancient use of the term secular was "roughly equivalent to what can be shared with non-Christians."⁶⁸ Markus's claim that the secular represents the shared space of culture bears near equivalence with the argument made by VanDrunen above; namely, that in the postdiluvian world, God designed the social order to be inhabited by diverse peoples whose religious moorings are not the basis for inclusion or exclusion from the social or political order, since such basis for adjudicating the rightness and wrongness of religion is left to God. The secular, rather, allows for a multitude of various religious expressions to inhabit a shared cultural space together. From this perspective, the secular age grants the theological legitimacy of pluralism as a

⁶⁴Markus, *Christianity and Secular*, 73.

⁶⁵VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, 515.

⁶⁶Horton, "The Time Between," 46. Crucially, Horton argues that because God's moral law exists in each person because of the covenant of creation, this natural law is sufficient to govern temporal society.

⁶⁷Ibid., 52.

⁶⁸Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 6.

feature of the social order, not a deviation. Again, this is not to argue that religious liberty or pluralism are absolute, eternal goods. They are not. As Markus notes,

The secular is that which belongs to this age and will have no part in the age to come, when Christ's kingship will hold universal sway. Political authority and institutions, with all the agencies of compulsion and enforcement, are destined for abrogation when the rule of God in Christ is finally revealed.⁶⁹

It would be even more accurate to "lament the reality of directional pluralism" in the saeculum, "even as it concedes that this is to be expected."⁷⁰

Similar to VanDrunen's argument, which argues that the Noahic covenant "governs an age that is temporary and passing, in force only so long as the 'earth remains' (Gen 8:22)," religious liberty, like pluralism, is thus provisional and exists only in a secular era.⁷¹ Secularism does, however, provide a foundation for an inviolable, interim social ethic of religious liberty. It is along these lines that Markus helpfully observes that the "powers" (Rom 13:6) retain their legitimacy, but not absolute legitimacy over all affairs. The powers are not destroyed, "but dethroned, kept on a short leash."⁷² Even still, the division between eternal and secular realms advocated here, like religious liberty, is not eternal. At an appointed time, the secular age will conclude and shared, contested social space will not be permitted as Christ vanquishes his enemies. According to Swiss theologian Oscar Cullmann, "Only in the kingdom of God will there no longer be two realms, for there God will be 'all in all.'"⁷³

⁶⁹Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 14. For explanation on the impact of Christ's rule for present political regimes, see Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 211-12.

⁷⁰James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 32.

⁷¹VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, 515.

⁷²Markus, *Christianity and Secular*, 14.

⁷³Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1964), 54-55.

Why, though, is any of this relevant for concerns related to religious liberty? The explanation is found in the intervening period begun at Genesis 9 establishing the intelligibility of religious liberty up until the dawning of Revelation 22. In sum, the Genesis 9 interregnum denotes the secular age from the penultimate perspective, which then authorizes the legitimacy of religious liberty as an eschatological reality and socially normative.

A Christian doctrine of the secular also helps give rise to the means of how the gospel must go forth in a secular age—patiently and persuasively. As Oliver O’Donovan has aptly observed, “Secularity is a stance of patience in the face of plurality.”⁷⁴ But also by establishing a milieu in which religious differentiation is permitted, a Christian doctrine of the secular also desacralizes the ever-present temptation to fuse the religious and the political into indistinguishable realities, thus compromising the church’s mission and infringing on non-Christian religious liberty.⁷⁵ James K. A. Smith argues that the triumph of Christ has deeply political ramifications for signaling to the state its limited jurisdiction: “The political is now inherently eschatological. Christ has disarmed the powers, made a public show of them, and delegitimized their claims to be mediators of ultimacy.”⁷⁶ One of the great political testaments to the church, then, is the church holding the United States accountable, for example, to its own maxim that it is “one nation under God.” While the state might proffer such a stance from the position of civil religion, the church sees such pronouncements as an eschatological reality that Christ has triumphed over it.

By witnessing to the state that its powers are limited, a Christian doctrine of the secular lets the state fulfill its God-assigned mission to administer law and execute justice, while also providing ample freedom for religious diversity and persuasion. Citing

⁷⁴O’Donovan, *Common Objects of Love*, 63.

⁷⁵Horton, “The Time Between,” 55-56.

⁷⁶Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 79.

1 Timothy 2:1, O'Donovan argues, provocatively, that the primary purpose of secular authority's authorization is to ensure a space for "men and women to be drawn into the governed community of God's kingdom."⁷⁷ Secularism, then, is an instrumental good whose highest purpose is to ensure a plane of contestability while also issuing a call to humility—what Markus calls Augustine's "radical agnosticism"—since Christians have no certainty as to the duration or direction of the secular period. Secularism also buttresses the temptation to declare triumph over the world prematurely, since according to Augustine, "the Two Cities are inextricably intertwined and mingled with each other, until they shall be separated in the last judgment."⁷⁸

Penultimate secularity and contestability. David VanDrunen argues, helpfully, for what he calls "penultimate secularity" or "finite secularity."⁷⁹ Such a description nicely aligns with the argument advanced here. The argument of this chapter is that the reality of the coming kingdom of Christ, upon which Christ will execute judgment on false belief, creates a "penultimate secularity" that grounds a doctrine of religious freedom for the present age. This penultimacy gives rise to the concept of

⁷⁷O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 146.

⁷⁸Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 36. See also Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. R. W. Dyson, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1:35. VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, 515, goes on to make a convincing case for the usefulness of penultimate secularity for securing the social space to enact the church's agenda freely:

The idea of a penultimate or finite secularity should be of great value to Christians. A holy (non-secular) social order could only be attractive to Christians if they themselves are in charge. But since the NT calls Christians "sojourners and exiles" in the world (1 Pet 2:11), rather than its rulers, they do not have the privilege of defining what the holiness of society would look like. A non-ideological secularity, therefore, serves for Christians' protection. Holiness is an all-encompassing concept. Much better for Christians to live in a social order marked by penultimate secularity, in which space is reserved for them to exist as the church and to profess their ultimate convictions, than to live in a social order that claims all-encompassing authority over its participants, as many Christians in the Middle East would probably attest when faced with "Islamist" or "secularist" alternatives."

VanDrunen's comments are inseparable from concerns related to religious liberty. States that do not see themselves as enacting an eschatological order are the states more likely to allow diverse, dissenting religions the ability to live out their convictions.

⁷⁹VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, 515.

contestability. The larger eschatological horizon of coming judgment ties each of these themes together and prevents them from dangling unattached from one another.

When surveying the available options for how religious liberty and church-state relations should be structured, two dominant paradigms emerge: A paradigm of theocracy in both soft and hard theonomic forms and what I term “seculocracy.” Seculocracy is altogether different from the paradigm of secularism advocated for in this chapter. “Seculocracy” is the equivalent of Richard John Neuhaus’s concern to eliminate religion from influencing decisions in the public square. What seculocracy and theocracy share in common is the mutual commitment to an absolute form of enacted orthodoxy. For theocracy, that orthodoxy is derived from religious norms. For seculocracy, that orthodoxy is derived from naturalistic means but often held with similar religious fervency. When seculocracy and theocracy interact, the result is a “clash of orthodoxies” that sends democratic societies into never-ending cycles of conflict and tumult.⁸⁰

When the reigning paradigms for the interaction of religion and politics and church-state relations are interrogated, they are mutually unhelpful in forming societies capable of reasoning through deep conflict that provide reciprocating avenues of religious liberty. How a polity responds to the reality of this conflict over competing visions for societal hegemony speaks to deeper assumptions that one holds about the role of the church in influencing society. Is the collision over worldviews normative, or should Christians expect to attain a level of hegemony? The contention of this dissertation is that total Christian hegemony is not expected. Rather, because of a legitimate and divinely authorized secular era, the church ought to expect perpetual bombardment and assault on its teaching. The very notion of the church’s mission given to it by Christ seems to assume that the mission is permanently dynamic throughout this era of history.

⁸⁰Robert P. George, *Clash of Orthodoxies: Law Religion & Morality in Crisis* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2002).

One is reminded of Sir Isaiah Berlin's famous quip that one of the greatest challenges and opportunities for liberal democracy is that its foundation assumes "the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual conflict with one another."⁸¹ Rather than something to be overcome, the paradigm argued for here expects these deeply incommensurable goals of society to remain in conflict until the consummation of history. Such conflict, then, awakens Christianity to the need for its own social space to persuade, preach, and proclaim. This paradigm prioritizes the kingdom of God's coming judgment. Further, its formulation of a doctrine of penultimate secularity is that contestability—the interrogation of religious and moral truth claims aimed at achieving consensus about the goods of human nature and human society—becomes the *modus operandi* of society. In an essay that criticizes neo-Kuyperianism for incorrectly expecting fallen societies to attain to standards of the kingdom of God in a penultimate era, VanDrunen argues convincingly for Christians to make peace with social difference:

Religious and metaphysical pluralism is at the very least a fact, a basic reality of Western society at the present moment and for many centuries past. More than that, religious and metaphysical pluralism is what Scripture suggests we should *expect* in society during this interim, inchoate period between the comings of Christ. Christians live in two kingdoms, and the civil kingdom, by God's ordination, is a mixed realm, not reserved exclusively for believers in Christ but designed for humanity as a whole in which to pursue its cultural task. The gospel of Christ has and will continue to go forward, calling sinners into the church, the spiritual kingdom, but it proceeds only amidst ongoing opposition and suffering for the Christian. . . . Religious and metaphysical pluralism will not be eliminated this side of Christ's second coming, however much we may try to wish, to preach, or to persecute it away.⁸²

VanDrunen's essay makes contestability a feature of the current era of the church's mission. Rather than something to be overcome (which it cannot be by virtue of

⁸¹Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 171.

⁸²David VanDrunen, "The Importance of the Penultimate: Reformed Social Thought and the Contemporary Critiques of the Liberal Society," *The Journal of Markets & Morality* 9, no. 2 (September 2006): 235-36. Later in the essay, VanDrunen takes stock of potential inevitabilities posed by such religious and metaphysical pluralism: "This is not to say that there will not be times when the clash of ultimate concerns among members of a society result in irreconcilable differences on basic penultimate concerns as well. In such times, the strenuous efforts toward principled compromise and consensus may reach their limits and finally fail." *Ibid.*, 237.

the era the church inhabits), VanDrunen's account offers an affirmative vision for the church being a voice for the reality of pluralism in society. This account also corrects foolish attempts at enacting totalized orthodoxies by issuing restraint and sober-mindedness about the current era. To be clear, Christians proclaim the superiority of the gospel, but they do so with an expectation of the challenges the gospel faces in pluralistic societies.

Thus, where secularocracy and theocracy work to overcome ideological difference and pluralism through often illiberal, coercive means, "contestulocracy" (a neologism) offers a paradigm that places interrogation, debate, and liberty at the forefront for settling disputes that arise due to religious, moral, and ideological difference expected in a secular age. In this paradigm, recognizing difference and expecting deep disagreement is a feature of the paradigm, and not an abuse of it. Contestulocracy squares with the theological and social ethical argument for religious liberty made in this chapter by giving legitimacy to the reality of diverse religious and moral perspectives expected to be found in a secular age. It prioritizes patience, persuasion, and a limited view of the state's power to play referee on moral and religious truth claims. Such a position militates against totalizing extremes, but also denudes the government from either secularism or pure neutrality. Michael Horton argues convincingly that a Christian doctrine of the secular means that "we can preserve the secular or common from both secularist ideology and from Christian triumphalism."⁸³

Speaking of the American experience of religious freedom which aligns nicely with themes thus far, Steven D. Smith observes that religious freedom in America "was not one of secularism or neutrality but rather open contestation."⁸⁴ An emphasis on contestability will require the church to develop a more chastened understanding of

⁸³Horton, "The Time Between," 63.

⁸⁴Steven D. Smith, *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 9.

Christianity's dominance in any given society and to see the challenge of social difference as a welcome feature constitutive of Christian mission.

The contestability model is Augustinian in the sense that it recognizes that humans and human societies are fragmented, corrupted, and imperfectible apart from God establishing his kingdom, yet simultaneously enmeshed together within a shared social space. In short, the model here emphasizes that social arrangements are often designed to minimize avarice and violence that would otherwise be inflicted upon one another. In the words of Robert Markus describing Augustine's understanding of human social arrangements, the ideal social arrangement is one that holds "the wicked in check, to enable the virtuous to live untroubled among them."⁸⁵

While little can be said because of space constraints as it would divert attention away from the overtly theological nature of the argument of this chapter, the penultimate secularity and contestability models advanced here align closely with the currents of liberal democracy.⁸⁶ While a critic of liberal democracy, Jeffrey Stout channels an Augustinian vision for liberal democracy that is highly commensurable with the vision for religious liberty advanced in this chapter. Stout argues for a social order

that can secure private space in which we can form friendships and families and voluntary associations. In these spheres, not in the sphere of political doings, we find the closest thing to true happiness available in this life—analogue to the form of association the blessed enjoy in God's Kingdom. Politics at its best makes room for such happiness and such associations. It also opens up the space in which individuals can pursue the spiritual life as they understand it. Politics is no substitute for that and always goes sour the moment we begin thinking of an earthly political community, whether actual or potential, as our real home. . . . Liberal society is not

⁸⁵Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 56.

⁸⁶For discussion on the intersections of Christian political theory and the foundations and compatibility of liberal democracy, see Robert Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); J. Caleb Clanton, ed., *The Ethics of Citizenship: Liberal Democracy and Religious Convictions* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Understanding Liberal Democracy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. Terence Cuneo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

the Kingdom of God. So, like all forms of political association in this life, it is radically imperfect. It is to be preferred not because it approximates the ideal but because its recognition of the limits of politics makes it not quite so bad as the other forms.⁸⁷

In conclusion, the approach advocated here elevates eschatology's place in determining the extent and duration of secular rule. The kingdom of God not only subjugates the state, but grants the church the ability to remind the state that the church's power and declarations are eternally impactful. As Jonathan Leeman rightly observes, "The local church possesses the power of eschatological declaration. The state possesses the power of temporal coercion."⁸⁸

Once again, Oliver O'Donovan's comments are helpful for reminding the state that its claims and power are temporal:

Secular institutions have a role confined to this passing age (*saeculum*). They do not represent the arrival of the new age and the rule of God. They have to do with the perennial cycle of birth and death which makes tradition, not with the resurrection of the dead which supersedes all tradition. The corresponding term to 'secular' is not 'sacred,' nor 'spiritual,' but 'eternal.' Applied to political authorities, the term 'secular' should tell us that they are not agents of Christ, but are marked for displacement when the rule of God in Christ is finally disclosed. They are Christ's conquered enemies; yet they have an indirect testimony to give, bearing the marks of his sovereignty imposed upon them, negating their pretensions and evoking their acknowledgment. Like the surge of a planet pocked with craters by the bombardment it receives from space, the governments of the passing age show the impact of Christ's dawning glory. This witness of the secular is the central core of Christendom.⁸⁹

An eschatology of the kingdom determines the shape and scope of a Christian doctrine of the *saeculum*. This, in turn, authorizes a doctrine of religious liberty based on the permissibility of religious diversity.

⁸⁷Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 233-34.

⁸⁸Leeman, *Political Church*, 374-75.

⁸⁹O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 211-12.

Religious Liberty and the Two Ages

Working sequentially from the two previous sections that first sought to argue for the legitimacy of Christ's judgment as a king and secondly, how judgment takes shape in the current era of history, this section gives greater attention to how the church understands its relationship to other forms of authority. This differential bears immense significance to the topic of religious liberty because by establishing how the kingdom sets up differentiated centers of political authority, the church gains a robust concept of how it relates to the state and other power centers in the present era. This distinction, in turn, informs the church's understanding of its own authority over and against competing authorities. This section will bear resemblance to many of the themes from the previous section, but towards the view of grasping an internal view of how the church understands its existence amid overlapping authorities. This section is necessary for gaining an internal conceptuality of how the church understands its existence buffeted between earthly and eternal authority. Clearly distilling the distinction between the church and the world, and the church and the state, grounds an understanding of the church's existence, which prevents the church from co-opting the state for ecclesial purposes, and places a buffer on the state's attempt to encroach upon the church's authority.

Two Ages or Two Kingdoms?

One of the perennial debates in questions of public theology and social ethics is the question of the church's mission in relationship to the state and to the culture. It poses innumerable difficult questions that are debated endlessly: How is mission to be understood? Is the church to impose its doctrine upon the state? Can the church reasonably expect to "transform" culture? Can the apparatus of the state be used to advance the Christian gospel? Or, to use a common reference, which of Niebuhr's typologies best defines the church's posture in society?⁹⁰

⁹⁰H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 2001).

One of the besetting failures around such discussions is the tendency to address these questions in term of praxis, rather than eschatology. Or, said differently, most discussions of Christianity and culture are animated by a desire for the church to find the best practice or approach to influencing culture. This answer is inadequate because it fails to address the issue from the subject of an eschatological horizon. Questions of method ought to reach deeper back to questions of era or epoch. The question is not “Which method is best?” but rather “What era of time is it and given that era of time, what ought the church to expect its mission to look like?” Dilemmas about the relationship of Christ to culture and of the church to the state are answered best depending on how one understands the mission of the state and the mission of the church in relation to each entity’s era of time and assigned authority.

The position advocated for in this chapter sees helpful components from several available paradigms in public theology and social ethics: Two Ages and Two Kingdoms. While I wish to bypass extended and internecine debate in Reformed circles on the merits each of these offer (and each does have useful contributions), the position advocated here is a Two Ages paradigm, which then incorporates helpful contributions from the Two Kingdoms paradigm.⁹¹ An understanding of the secular era supplies a greater understanding for what it means for the church to advocate for religious liberty in a time of contestability.

Oliver O’Donovan has remarked, “The passing age of principalities and powers has overlapped with the coming age of God’s kingdom.”⁹² O’Donovan’s statement conveys the duality of ages (or eras) in which the church finds itself. One of the

⁹¹For a helpful article that seeks to combat the perception of continuity between Augustine’s Two Cities paradigm and Luther’s Two Kingdoms paradigm, see James K. A. Smith, “Reforming Public Theology,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 47 (2012): 122-37. Smith helpfully notes, “The single most common error in reading Augustine is to confuse the earthly city with finite, temporal, creation. On this misreading, the earthly city becomes identified with the political, or even more narrowly, the state.” *Ibid.*, 127.

⁹²O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 211.

most important aspects of this discussion is the necessity of understanding the nature of that duality; or identifying what the division is that marks the duality. How and in what ways is the church living in a secular reality while living as aliens and sojourners of the coming kingdom (1 Pet 2:11)?

Assuming the framework of inaugurated eschatology, which then posits a doctrine of penultimate secularity, a Two Ages paradigm argues that the primary dividing line for history's telos in Scripture is between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh. That which is passing away is the life of the flesh (Adam); that which is promised to continue into eternity is life in the Spirit (Christ).⁹³ Again, this merely restates the secularization thesis mentioned above. Life in the Spirit and life in the flesh are overlapping, yet asynchronous ages. The Spirit is eternal; the flesh is not. What is crucial to emphasize is that both representative ages have unique, legitimate institutional authority over prescribed institutions. Institutions of creation, such as marriage, family, and the state belong to life in the flesh because in some form and fashion, each of these is radically altered or abrogated in the eschaton. The eschatological age—eternal age—includes membership in the church. Thus, the church finds itself guided by the authority given to it by Christ (Matt 16:18-19), yet bombarded by legitimate political authority on the outside. Each institution retains its legitimate authority respective to its calling.

A doctrine of the Two Ages is helpful for questions of religious liberty because it provides a cipher in how Christians understand their calling as Christians, while also as citizens in the state. It helps Christians understand that two ages interact with one another while remaining institutionally distinct. A Christian therefore lives fully amid fallen institutional structures while at the same time fully regenerated and a part of an eschatological age, the church. Leeman cites Luther's *simul justus et peccator* as a

⁹³Leeman, *Political Church*, 275. I am relying heavily on the framework as presented in chap. 5 of Leeman's volume, which masterfully lays out what he calls "The Politics of the New Covenant." Ibid., 270-78.

helpful reminder that in a Two Ages paradigm, “activities of the flesh and the Spirit will inform the activities of both creation institutions and new creation institutions.”⁹⁴

This framework necessitates greater “institutional specificity” for grounding a Christian doctrine of religious liberty. According to Leeman, once the church understands its existence as a new creation institution, it allows for a desacralized understanding of the state’s authority as a creational (and therefore transient) institution:

A more institutionally sensitive approach has no trouble acknowledging that religion infiltrates and saturates the public square and that politics is always spiritual, but it asks more precise questions about who has been authorized to do what. It presents religious freedom as a property of the fact that God has not authorized prosecuting false worship. And it locates religious freedom in the field of formal religious institutional affiliation—that is, membership—not in lawmaking, which is impossible. It also seeks to ensure that legal space exists for churches, so that members of every nation might be drawn into the Kingdom of God.⁹⁵

Leeman’s argument is convincing and is immensely helpful in providing a more accurate, and eschatologically grounded foundation for understanding the locus of authority for both church and state while considering that individuals will inhabit both ages simultaneously in the present. A Two Ages paradigm clarifies that the duration of membership in one institution (the church) will outlast membership in another institution (the state) and therefore places necessary boundaries on what each respective institution hopes to enact in a secular age.

At the same time, Two Kingdoms theology is helpful in clarifying what it is exactly that governs these institutionally distinct realms. The state governs by the sword; the church by the Word and its own internal governance. A Two Ages paradigm also pushes back against drastic Two Kingdoms interpretations that would draw sharp,

⁹⁴Leeman, *Political Church*, 276.

⁹⁵Ibid., 273. Leeman is correct to argue for a greater institutional specificity. Doing so, he argues, shores up the lines of authority, jurisdiction and competence for each of Scripture’s institutions. What authority do they have and how far does it extend? For instance, the main point of separation between church and state is not whether the president believes in God and governs accordingly. The primary point of institutional separation is in their membership and their jurisdiction. (Ibid., 271-72)

distinctions between the church and the world. Whereas Two Kingdoms theology is tempted to erect barriers between church and state, a Two Age paradigm is more porous, meaning that it sees these dualities as not necessarily competing, but conversant with one another's legitimate authorities.

**The Kingdom and Religious Liberty:
Subordinating Earthly Rule
and Jurisdiction**

The kingdom of God as the center for religious liberty subordinates the rule of earthly rulers to the reign of Christ. This has practical implications for the power that Christians give the state. If the state lacks ultimate power in view of the kingdom of God, it means that the claims of the state are limited. For example, when the Supreme Court acts to redefine marriage, which is the catalyst for much of the contemporary dispute over religious liberty, Christians understand that the state has acted outside its jurisdictional authority, since marriage is a creational ordinance. Oliver O'Donovan notes that Christians have a duty to stand in the gap and remind the state of its limited power:

The most truly Christian state understands itself most thoroughly as 'secular.' It makes the confession of Christ's victory and accepts the relegation of its own authority. It echoes the words of John the Baptist: 'He must increase; I must decrease' (John 3:30). Like the Baptist, it has a place on the threshold of the Kingdom, not within it.⁹⁶

While I would reject the very possibility that "the state" could ever make such a confession, those who occupy the levers of power do well to understand their authority in relationship to that of Christ. By focusing on the kingdom of God, Christians have the ability to understand the derived authority that the state possesses. Even where Christians find themselves at odds with the state, again, in the words of O'Donovan, "The only corresponding service that the church can render to this authority of the passing world is

⁹⁶O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 219.

to help it make that act of self-denying recognition.”⁹⁷ A state can possess an awareness of its limited powers without identifying as Christian or non-Christian when doing so. The state that actively refuses to see itself as an arbiter of the divine is a state acting in accord with the New Testament.⁹⁸ One of the tasks of a Christian ethic of religious liberty, then, is for Christians to remind policymakers of their accountability to Jesus Christ with the expectation that legislators can make morally-formed decisions on policy without committing the state to a religious commitment. Christians are to pronounce that the power of state and its policy-makers are term-limited and circumscribed whether the state is cognizant of this claim.

All that has been said thus far has been pointing toward the question of what jurisdiction the state has over religious affairs. The answer, explicitly and implicitly provided thus far is this: remarkably little. As Lenow notes, drawing from Romans 13:1-7, government is established to ensure “civil peace, not doctrinal purity.”⁹⁹ Leaving aside jurisprudential debates about the Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment, the greater theological implication is both profound and simple: Aside from instances where religion is imposing an indisputable harm and danger to society, the state lacks the mandate to adjudicate theological affairs.¹⁰⁰ Even where the state would need to investigate actions stemming from religious motivation, it is not the responsibility of the state to adjudicate whether the harm stems from correct or incorrect theology. Rather, a

⁹⁷O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 219.

⁹⁸The state, even in a non-preferential form, is still making some type of moral commitment even if not couched with explicit religious commitments. For example, The state that permits abortion is meddling in divine matters by transgressing the moral law of God. A state can enact immoral policies, however, without committing itself, formally, to one religion.

⁹⁹Lenow, “Religious Liberty and the Gospel,” 115.

¹⁰⁰This separation leaves other questions, such as the issue of school vouchers for religious education, unaddressed. The question of how the church and state can co-exist is outside the scope of this chapter.

state can observe the effects of a religion's teaching in society and then reasonably discern that a religion's teaching is causing harm and act to restrict that religion on the basis of its outcomes, not its teachings. What it must do in this situation, however, is withhold adjudicating whether that religion is true or false. This distinction accords with the words of John Leland, one of the Baptist architects of religious liberty, who thought the government should punish bad outcomes that result from religion, not religion itself:

The duty of the magistrates is, not to judge of the divinity or tendency of doctrines; but when those principles break out into overt acts of violence, then to use the civil sword and punish the vagrant for what he has done, and not for the religious phrenzy that he acted from.¹⁰¹

Before questions of harm, though, it is important to frame the ontology of the state in relationship to its jurisdiction in order to get a proper understanding of the extent of the state's place within the unveiling of God's kingdom. Hendrikus Berkhof has argued that with the resurrection and ascension of Christ, the powers have been defanged, so to speak. Their power is term-limited, and their authority is prescribed. Yet, earthly political orders are "still the framework of creation, preserving it from disintegration."¹⁰² As Markus writes,

The powers of this world are posed between the eschatological kingdom and the realm of Satan or the Antichrist, and they have a choice between serving the one or the other. By claiming absolute powers not subject to God's authority, by usurping quasi-divine prerogative over human beings, in short, by seeking to escape the conditions imposed by the triumph of Christ's cross over them, they betray the purpose for which they are sanctioned.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹John Leland, "The Rights of Conscience Inalienable," in *The Sacred Rights of Conscience: Selected Readings on Religious Liberty and Church-State Relations in the American Founding*, ed. Daniel Dreisbach and Mark David Hall (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), 339.

¹⁰²Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, trans. John Howard Yoder, 2nd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977), 30.

¹⁰³Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 16. Though I reject the pacifistic implications of John Howard Yoder's argument, his words are instructive in developing a proper theology of the state in relationship to religious liberty. John Howard Yoder, *Original Revolution: The Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 62-63 writes,

The essential change which has taken place is not within the realm of the old aeon, vengeance and the state, where there is really no change; it is rather that the new aeon revealed in Christ takes primacy over the old, explains the meaning of the old, and will finally vanquish the old. The state did

Thus, it is not unreasonable to conclude that if a state deems itself a capable arbiter over religious affairs, then it is not only transgressing its circumscribed role biblically, but also assuming a demonic undertaking of a false mantle of authority.

One of the most significant passages that gives witness to the limited role of the state (though not ultimately relevant to the penultimate secularity argument) is Matthew 22:17-22.¹⁰⁴

Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

As Francis Beckwith notes, the historic reading of this passage is the instruction that Jesus frames the church and government as having different spheres of authority.¹⁰⁵ Beckwith also posits an interesting insight on the political implications of this passage, noting that Jesus's question to the Pharisees about whose image is on the coin begs an additional "unsaid" question: Who or what has the image of God on it? Beckwith writes, "If the coin represents the authority of Caesar because it has his image on it, then we, human beings, are under the authority of God because we have his image on us."¹⁰⁶ This authority distinction has far-reaching implications according to Beckwith because it confirms the theory of limited government: "Thus, both government and the

not change with the coming of Christ; what changed was the coming of the new aeon which proclaimed the doom of the old one.

¹⁰⁴This passage is a classic text often cited for giving limit to state power and for legitimizing religious liberty. For examples, see Duke, "The Christian Doctrine of Religious Liberty," 103-4; Smith, *Rise and Decline*, 21.

¹⁰⁵Francis J. Beckwith, *Politics for Christians: Statecraft as Soulcraft* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 64.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*

church, though having separate jurisdictions, share a common obligation to advance the good of those are made in God's image."¹⁰⁷

Evangelical theologian Wayne Grudem has argued similarly that Matthew 22 offers a foundation for demarcating the limits of the state. "The things that are God's are not to be under the control of the civil government (or 'Caesar),' writes Grudem.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, what belongs to the government is not bifurcated from God's rule. Rather, God decrees the government certain legitimate powers. On this account, all power, rule, and jurisdictional authority are grounded in God's decree. James K. A. Smith argues that this passage should not be read as Jesus "carving up distinct jurisdictions of authority."¹⁰⁹ Jesus announcing legitimate spheres of government authority is not an "uncontested sphere of secular right."¹¹⁰ Smith argues that Jesus only offers the state legitimate sanction in the same sense of "granting someone the right to occupy a building that has been condemned to demolition" because Jesus understands the state to have a limited and derived authority given to it ultimately by God.¹¹¹ Jesus is offering a politics determined ultimately by eschatology, not independent sphere authority.

Grudem enumerates civil affairs such as taxes belong to Caesar's sphere of influence, while religion belongs to God. Grudem also makes note that Jesus's words place a restriction on the civil realm, but also upon the church as well, intimating that the church has an obligation to obey those duties divinely mandated to the state by God and which it cannot encroach upon.¹¹² Thus Christian anarchy and state totalitarianism are

¹⁰⁷Beckwith, *Politics for Christians*, 64.

¹⁰⁸Wayne A. Grudem, *Politics according to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 25.

¹⁰⁹Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 76.

¹¹⁰O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 92.

¹¹¹Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 76.

¹¹²Grudem, *Politics according to the Bible*, 25. For additional hermeneutical perspectives on

outside the purview of the New Testament's witness on church-state relationships and religious liberty. Cullman argues that Jesus's interactions with the state in the New Testament reveal that "he does not regard the State as in any sense a final, divine institution: on the other hand, we see that he accepts the State and radically renounces attempt to overthrow it."¹¹³ Cullman posits that Jesus saw the state as "circumscribed" with a particular "duality:" "On the one hand, the State is nothing final. On the other, it has the right to demand what is necessary to its existence—but no more. Every totalitarian claim of the State is thereby disallowed."¹¹⁴

The bigger question is against what backdrop is Jesus's announcement made? In the framework advanced here, Jesus's announcement that Caesar's claim is limited supports the thesis of this chapter that the kingdom of God is the overarching canopy that assigns the state its proper jurisdiction of administering justice only (Rom 13:1-7). This kingdom, which Jesus enacts in his presence, militates against the temptation for the state to absolutize its power.

H. Richard Niebuhr captures the spirit of jurisdictional issues at stake in helping remind us that the discussion concerning religious liberty, before it is about issues of free exercise, is about issues of authority and allegiance to ultimate ends:

Matt 22, see Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, trans. John Henry Cardinal Newman (London: The Saint Austin Press, 1999), 1:748-52; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 330-32; Donald A. Hagner, "Tribute to Caesar?" in *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 633-37; John Calvin and A. W. Morrison, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrews Press, 1972), 3:22-27; Ulrich Luz, "The Jerusalem Controversies," in *Matthew 21-28*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 61-67; Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 523-26; Martin Luther, "Gospel for the Twenty-Third Sunday After Trinity," in *Church Postil V*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes and James L. Langebartels, *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 2016), 277-92; Martin Luther, "Against the Robbing and Murdering Horde of Peasants," in *The Christian in Society III*, ed. Robert C. Schultz, *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 49-55; Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 553-58; Turner, *Matthew*, 529.

¹¹³Cullmann, *The State in The New Testament*, 18.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 37.

Religion, so understood, lies beyond the provenance of the state not because it is a private, inconsequential, or other-worldly matter, but because it concerns men's allegiance to a sovereignty and a community more immediate, more inclusive, and more fateful than those of the political commonwealth.¹¹⁵

This question of teleology points to a conclusion offered by O'Donovan who argues that from the vantage of Christian theology, "state exists in order to give judgment, but under the authority of Christ's rule it gives judgment under law, never as its own law."¹¹⁶

From the perspective of the state, then, religious liberty poses one of the greatest threats to the state's power. According to Peter Leithart,

So long as the church preaches the gospel and functions as a properly 'political' reality, a polity of her own, the kings of the earth have a problem on their hands. Some Haman will notice that there is a people in the empire who do not live according to the laws of the Medes, and reports will come from the colonies that there are men attacking the decrees of Caesar and proclaiming another King. As soon as the Church appears, it becomes clear to any alert politician that worldly politics is no longer the only game in town. The introduction of the Church into any city means that the city has a challenger within the walls.¹¹⁷

While any state will be tempted to exercise its powers too broadly and aggressively, a Christian approach to religious liberty provides the state with its own divine calling. In this way, the church serves the state by calling the state to its proper domain. This achieves an affirmative vision for the state's role, rather than a pessimistic, and inherently anti-imperial interpretation. A church that takes seriously its call to proclaim the kingdom of God will thus challenge the state to be true to its limited calling. As Sherif Girgis and Ryan T. Anderson argue, the state's respect for the right of religious liberty acts to "impose universal limits on the state's authority."¹¹⁸ As those authors note, the limited jurisdiction of the state's coercive power allows civil society (and I would

¹¹⁵H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture: With Supplementary Essays* (San Francisco: Harper, 1960), 71.

¹¹⁶O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 223.

¹¹⁷Peter J. Leithart, *Against Christianity* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 136.

¹¹⁸John Corvino, Ryan T. Anderson, and Sherif Girgis, *Debating Religious Liberty and Discrimination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 144.

argue primarily, the church) to make moral claims on the state.¹¹⁹ Indeed, it is from a posture of understanding its limits that the “most truly Christian state understands itself most thoroughly as secular.”¹²⁰

The Sovereignty of the Kingdom of God and Religious Liberty

The kingdom of God is a sovereign empire that subjugates all earthly empires to its reign. Yet, at emphasis in this chapter is the inaugurated, eschatological element of this reign. This means that while the kingdom of God does retain ultimate sovereignty (power to command) over earthly political powers in the present age, God’s kingdom delegates authority to lesser authorities in the intervening secular era. But, crucially, any authority that modern day political orders enjoy is a derived authority that, as previous sections have argued, is limited both in time and jurisdiction. The sovereignty of the kingdom also denotes how its decree advances at the command of God. Glenn Hinson writes, “God alone decrees how God’s reign will grow. Human beings may announce it. They may urge others to enter. They cannot determine who does enter.”¹²¹

Liberal Protestant ethicist Phillip Wogaman has penned one of the few volumes from a Protestant perspective dedicated exclusively to religious liberty.¹²² Interestingly,

¹¹⁹Corvino, Anderson, and Girgis, *Debating Religious Liberty and Discrimination*, 144.

¹²⁰O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 219.

¹²¹Hinson, *Religious Liberty*, 42.

¹²²Wogaman, *Protestant Faith and Religious Liberty*, 95,

Since God transcends any man, culture, or society, it ill behooves any man to make pretentious claims on the basis of which intolerance and persecution might be grounded. If God is sovereign Lord of all, no man can justly claim to know all about God’s intentions at every time and place in human history. No man can have unlimited confidence that God, the sovereign Lord of all the ages, has spoken only to him or to his community. Nor can any man have unlimited confidence in his own perceptions of the word which God has spoken to him. Latent beneath religious intolerance is the silent assumption of one’s own absolute rightness. . . . If God is sovereign and transcendent, he is also to some extent hidden; and religious humility thus derives from recognition of the difference between Creator and creature.

Again, one can hardly argue with the broad strokes of Wogaman’s argument; yet looking to ground religious liberty in hermeneutical skepticism does not seem to be a workable strategy for a Christian approach to

Wogaman grounds his doctrine of religious liberty in the sovereignty of God. According to Wogaman,

Negatively, the sovereignty of God stands in judgment upon every absolute identification of God with what is less than God (idolatry) and upon every human pretension of infallibility. If God is sovereign and transcendent of his creation (as the Reformers emphatically held) then no man can claim perfect understanding of God (as the Reformers sometimes forgot!). Positively, if God is sovereign he may disclose himself to any man at any time or place in ways which it would be blasphemous to any other man or political institution to prejudice.¹²³

Much should be said of Wogaman's proposal. First, from the perspective of governmental authority, it is helpful for magistrates to understand their own limitation over religious matters. The idea of an omniscient magistrate runs counter to biblical witness. The same can be said for how peers act toward one another in society, as far as expressing humility about how religious views are held. Wogaman's proposal is thus helpful in casting a generic concept of sovereignty to which most theists could subscribe. Negatively, however, the methodological skepticism that underwrites his paradigm is insufficiently Christian.¹²⁴ Whereas Wogaman wishes to leave God's disclosure to his sovereignty, which on the one hand is of course true, one hears in Wogaman's proposal an appeal to agnosticism about the nature of who God is. This is unsatisfying from a confessional evangelical perspective.

An evangelical doctrine of Scripture would not assume that God has disclosed all aspects of his being, but an evangelical doctrine of Scripture would conclude that God has disclosed of himself all that God wished to disclose and this disclosure is sufficient enough to dispute radical agnosticism. This is because God does not wish to hide himself or keep individuals in baited, unending search. Biblical revelation and the mysteries of

religious liberty.

¹²³Wogaman, *Protestant Faith and Religious Liberty*, 10.

¹²⁴Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 1:247, offers a similar line of argument: "No toleration is possible without a measure of provisional skepticism about the truth we hold."

God's absolute being are not, *prima facie*, at odds. Instead, biblical revelation holds fast to the accuracy of divine revelation, while also understanding that God's ways are his own, and that God disclosing himself will never violate what is revealed in Scripture (Isa 58:8-9). But religious liberty ought not be grounded in a methodological skepticism about the disclosure of God. Rather, religious liberty is grounded in a revelatory framework whereby the sovereignty of God's kingdom subjugates lesser authorities.

At the conceptual level, Wogaman's appeal to sovereignty is helpful, and it offers positive contributions, generally, to thinking how sovereignty as a concept debunks and subjugates any claim the state may make over religious affairs. Indeed, Christ's sovereignty "stands in judgment" against totalitarian impulses that would rival religious belief, but as a practical matter, Wogaman's paradigm is not thoroughly descriptive enough so as to be labeled Christian, must less Protestant.

On these grounds, Wogaman's proposal is necessary, but not sufficient, for developing a robust Christian social ethic of religious liberty. "Sovereignty" as Wogaman uses it, lacks a Christological circumference. In other words, Wogaman's appeals to sovereignty are the same type of appeals to sovereignty that a non-Christian could make about religious liberty. Sovereignty is indeed a helpful category for religious liberty, but it is better served by tethering sovereignty to the idea of kingdom more specifically.

What needs greater clarity is the sovereignty of the kingdom of God with reference to its Christic foundations. The question thus becomes: How is God's sovereignty useful for religious liberty and what does Christ's sovereignty over his kingdom mean for religious liberty?

Sovereignty as a biblical concept applied to religious liberty means that ultimate allegiance is paid to that which is most sovereign. Hence, the New Testament's witness of the willingness of the apostles to reject the claims of even a religious imperium for that of Jesus instead: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

While questions of anthropology will be discussed in chapter 3, the question of humanity's sinfulness also owes significantly to the question of divine sovereignty concerning religious liberty. A realistic view of the fallen nature of humanity should buttress the claim of individuals or governments that would assume upon themselves the role of theological referee. As James Wood writes, "The sinful nature of man negates the possibility of the absolutizing of human authority, religious or political, and by limiting all human authority provides an important foundation for religious liberty."¹²⁵

The Kingdom of God and the Soteriological Aspect of Religious Liberty

While portions of this section bear similarity to arguments in chapter 3 and chapter 4, it is important to establish the link between how the kingdom of God implies a doctrine of religious liberty for the most basic of themes related to soteriology, because as Barrett Duke notes, "The doctrine of salvation itself contributes to our understanding of God's design for religious liberty."¹²⁶ Issues of salvation can never be separated from questions central to the kingdom of God because God's rule simultaneously manifests his saving rule.

If entry into the kingdom is contingent on regeneration, the nature of regeneration raises questions about the medium or vehicle through which individuals are saved. This section argues that the kingdom of God's salvific enactment intersects with domains relevant to religious liberty: the conscience, justification by faith alone, and the voluntary nature of saving faith.

¹²⁵James E. Wood, "A Biblical View of Religious Liberty," *The Ecumenical Review* 30, no. 1 (January 1978): 37.

¹²⁶Duke, "The Christian Doctrine of Religious Liberty," 100.

The Kingdom of God, the Conscience, and Justification by Faith

The conscience, in tandem with the will, is the vehicle that Scripture points to that makes individuals realize guilt and the need for salvation. The conscience indicts in the sense that it convicts individuals of wrongdoing (Rom 1:21; 2:14-16), while also directing the inner person to their need to seek absolution (2 Cor 1:12; 1 Tim 1:19). The conscience, though, is one aspect of humanity's essential nature, making a person rational and "free to think for himself as responsible to God for the use of his intellect. As a moral being, he is free to choose good or evil and is responsible to God for his choice."¹²⁷ Entry into God's kingdom is thus contingent on the conscience being persuaded (Acts 17:2-4; 2 Cor 5:11), which means rationally self-chosen without external coercion.

"Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). One might reject seeing justification by faith as an element to religious liberty. Justification by faith, however, is the foundation for how individuals experience salvation. Justification by faith denotes the personalist nature of salvation: Humanity (the lawbreaker) standing before God (the lawgiver) asking on what grounds he or she is to be saved.

J. D. Hughey sheds helpful light on the nature of saving grace as an aspect of faith and religious liberty by noting that no action of another individual, church, or state can substitute for God's grace and personal faith.¹²⁸ So before there are questions of how one's faith is to be exercised, Hughey is concerned to demonstrate the relevance of religious liberty in how salvation is obtained and achieved—it is grounded in a personal recognition of inward guilt and personal need for redemption. Thus, the kingdom of God is received by faith and not by external factors.

¹²⁷John David Hughey, "The Theological Frame of Religious Liberty," *The Christian Century* 80, no. 45 (November 1963): 1365.

¹²⁸Wogaman, *Protestant Faith and Religious Liberty*, 64, argues similarly: "There is no apparent way in which salvation, thus conceived, could be reduced to a matter of political or even ecclesiastical policy. Neither state nor church can *make* people 'be religious.'"

Interestingly, Hughey enters Catholic and Protestant debates on justification to emphasize his point on the nature of saving faith and its relevance to religious liberty. In Hughey's view, the Catholic sacramental teaching of *ex opera operato* runs contrary to true religious liberty since it invades on human freedom. "Saving faith," Hughey writes, "is both a divine gift and a personal human response to God. Coercion is completely alien to its character."¹²⁹

Assuming a Protestant view of justification by faith alone, it is from this position that Leeman enters the picture, pointing out that the "grand mistake of Christendom" is nothing less than infant baptism. According to Leeman, this practice, which coincided with medieval church-state relationships, was wholly problematic because it "treated the membership in the church and state as two overlapping circles, thereby usurping the authority of the church."¹³⁰ By making membership in the church and membership in the state coterminous, an unregenerate church polity was not only a reality, but also a guaranteed certainty. An evangelical account of religious liberty relies upon a doctrine of justification by faith by insisting that individuals enter God's kingdom individually and conscientiously, thus negating between membership in the church with membership in the state.

It is also justification by faith itself that, as Niebuhr argued, "presupposed the imperfection of the redeemed." This imperfection, to Niebuhr's line of thinking, demonstrates the need for sinful individuals to extend religious humility to others for fear of exercising "intolerant fanaticism."¹³¹

The kingdom of God and mediation. If the kingdom of God manifests itself through the operations of the conscience brought to repentance and faith through

¹²⁹Hughey, "The Theological Frame of Religious Liberty," 1366.

¹³⁰Leeman, *Political Church*, 374.

¹³¹Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 1:44.

justification, the implication is that institutions or persons that would attempt to mediate salvation on behalf of individuals, apart from the individual agency of God working through sinful persons, is impossible. J. D. Hughey notes that the absence of government ability to effect spiritual regeneration relies upon the assumption that “no earthly power has the right to enforce obedience to God, since his authority over the spirit of man has not been delegated.”¹³² As the apostle Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:5, there is only “one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ.” This is significant because it dismisses the role any outside force would play in accomplishing an individual’s salvation. Duke rightly observes that because individuals are fallen, “people are incapable of fully interpreting the will of God in all matters for other people, and they are certainly incapable of properly enforcing spiritual standards.”¹³³

This notion of fallibility also, however, speaks to the question of agency. In the Christian salvation scheme, individual salvation results in membership in a community (to be discussed in the final section), but individual salvation rests on the assent of the individual to correspond to God’s call to salvation. This scheme precludes the ability for salvation to be enacted on behalf of individuals: “The kingship of Jesus,” writes O’Donovan, “is such as can be recognized only by those who recognize it on their own account; it lacks accessibility to public opinion.”¹³⁴

The Kingdom and Voluntary Faith

The voluntary nature of faith at the root of religious liberty is reflected in the receptive, rather than an impositional nature of the kingdom of God (at least on this side of the eschaton). Coerced or imposed faith is an ontological contradiction in terms. “Any

¹³²Hughey, “The Theological Frame of Religious Liberty,” 1365.

¹³³Duke, “The Christian Doctrine of Religious Liberty,” 95.

¹³⁴O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 140.

law of church or state,” Phillip Wogaman writes, “designed to make people be Christian would, if obeyed, more precisely succeed in making *not* be Christian.”¹³⁵ Individuals can be coerced into religious performance and religious observance, but faith can never be effectuated externally. Therefore, ultimately, religious liberty has biblical warrant: The nature of true faith requires that faith be grasped and acted upon freely and sincerely.

A. F. Carrillo de Albornoz rightly connects how aspects of the conscience and justification lead to voluntary expressions of faith, which, in turn, makes religious liberty a precursor to authentic faith:

Humanity, as it is presented in the biblical revelation, is intelligible only in the hypothesis that the purpose of God is better served by leaving man free to make choices for which he alones bears the consequences, than by restraining him or coercing him in order to keep him from making mistakes.¹³⁶

At the same time, in keeping with the eschatological framework of penultimate secularity that this chapter has articulated, looking at the nature of how Christ advanced the kingdom during his earthly ministry militates against the claim that Christians can act either triumphantly or coercively in our religious dealings:

The basis of religious liberty is the very fact that Christ did not come in heavenly splendor and worldly majesty to subjugate any possible resistance and force all and everybody into subjection. Christ made himself a servant and humbled himself even unto the death of the cross. . . . Or to use a theological term which at any rate is familiar to people of Lutheran tradition: “The foundation of religious liberty is the fact of the *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) over against the *theologia gloriae*.”¹³⁷

It is for reasons of voluntary faith that religious liberty bears relevance to the Christian teaching of the Golden Rule (Matt 7:12). If the kingdom cannot be entered into coercively and the nature of faith is voluntary, then it only makes sense that personally

¹³⁵Wogaman, *Protestant Faith and Religious Liberty*, 64-65.

¹³⁶A. F. Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty* (New York: Association Press, 1963), 91.

¹³⁷Wood, “A Biblical View of Religious Liberty,” 40.

ascertaining religious belief requires leaving others to ascertain religious belief for themselves in accordance with how individuals grasp divine truth and duty.

One might conclude from the above discussion that a Christian doctrine of religious liberty informed by the kingdom of God results in a doctrine of justification by (voluntary, non-coerced) faith alone.

The Kingdom of God and the Ecclesial Aspect of Religious Liberty

Commenting on the ecclesiology of Roger Williams, historian Roland Bainton observed that for Williams, the distinct separation between church and state was “not simply that the spheres of their operation are distinct, but that the basis of their respective memberships must be different.”¹³⁸ The church is central to a Christian social ethic of religious liberty because the church is an eschatologically distinct institution called out to bear witness to the kingdom of God in a secular age free from political control. The orientation of its political independence from the surrounding nations is the grounds of its liberty. The kingdom of God under the lordship of Jesus, who commissioned the church, finds expression in the universal church, but also in local congregations. The kingdom, however, is not coterminous with the church.¹³⁹ By virtue of the church possessing sole authority of the keys of the kingdom (Matt 16:19), the kingdom of God’s influence on ecclesiology relates to religious liberty in three crucial ways: Identifying the nature of the church, stressing the urgency of the free exercise of the church in its ethical duties as a testament to the kingdom’s ethical mandate, and protecting the church against itself in wanting to see the apparatus of the state used for ecclesial purposes.

¹³⁸Roland H. Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty: Nine Biographical Studies* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 223.

¹³⁹Mark Dever, “The Church,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Akin, 771.

Church Identity and Religious Liberty

Religious liberty assumes that the identity of a religious body is not coterminous with the surrounding culture.¹⁴⁰ According to Baptist ethicist Mark Coppenger, “The body of Christ in a nation is not co-extensive with the populace.”¹⁴¹ The church’s identity as a distinct entity is bound up with the profession of who its Lord is—Jesus Christ.¹⁴² What should be an obvious statement is also the foundation for establishing the intelligibility of the church as institutionally distinct from the world. Because the church is distinct, it has an ontological and jurisdictional structure that makes its mission different than the mission of the state. Keeping that distinction clear is essential to grounding religious liberty in the necessity of the institutional church being kept separate from the world.¹⁴³

Indeed, it is where the church becomes coterminous with society around it that leads to the deformation of Christian identity (again, consider Leeman’s statement on the deleterious effects of infant baptism, which falsely equated membership in the church with membership in the state). Robert Markus’s emphasis on the political orientation of the church, that “Christianity is committed—perhaps uniquely among world religions—to a belief in a Church—that is, a visible community of believers distinct from a political society” is a necessary corollary for understanding its identity as distinct from the

¹⁴⁰In an imagined scenario where a society is religiously homogenous, religious liberty would not exist, because individuals would not be aware of their need to pursue religious practice differently than from their surroundings. It is only where religious heterogeneity exists that true religious liberty can be exercised. Deleterious effects occur when a society grows inoculated to the claims of religion, and civil religion results. For an essay that explores the problematic effects of civil religion for robust Christian social witness, see Russell Moore, “Can the Religious Right Be Saved?” *First Things* 269 (January 2017): 33–42.

¹⁴¹Mark T. Coppenger, “A Free Church in a Free State,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 11, no. 4 (December 2007): 54.

¹⁴²Edwin S. Gaustad, *Roger Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 76.

¹⁴³In a conversation I had with Russell Moore, he argued that 1 Cor 5:9–13 is one of the most important passages related to religious liberty in the Bible. Moore argued that the church maintaining the purity of its moral witness is essential to the church understanding its distinctiveness in society. Only a church aware of who constitutes a member of the church is capable of sorting itself out from the world. This is a vitally important endeavor. A focus on keeping the church morally distinct and not coterminous with the world is a constituting act necessary to mark out the church’s identity.

world.¹⁴⁴ The kingdom produces a people, a covenanting church, whose citizenship is in heaven, thus distinct from the world and with allegiances higher than earthly political orders (Phil 3:20; Heb 11:10, 16; 12:28).

With the kingdom establishing the church, the church engages in an act of self-demarcation that helps furnish both it and the state's differentiated roles. According to Edmund Clowney,

The church witnesses to the righteousness of the kingdom, penetrating society like leaven or salt, but it is not identified with the world it touches. The church is neither competitive nor correlative to the family, to the state, or to other societal institutions. These are the forms of life in the world, from which the church is distinguished.¹⁴⁵

Institutionally, establishing the church's perimeter is central to prevent the confusion of boundaries and roles between the family, church, and government. Barrett Duke notes that while these institutions include some "shared" responsibilities, preserving the distinction of the primary institutions that God has ordained serves as a reminder "none of them are designed to fulfill the God-given purposes of the other."¹⁴⁶ Thus, preserving the institutional identity of the church, and in turn, knowing what the church is not, is integral to religious liberty. Yet, the identity of the church as an outpost of the kingdom of God also constitutes the manner in which the kingdom is established: "The kingdom established by grace must be advanced by grace, then consummated in glory. Not by political power, but by the power of the Spirit, is the gospel carried to the nations."¹⁴⁷ Because the kingdom is "not of this world" (John 18:36), the church does not wield or advance the faith through the coercive sword.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 15.

¹⁴⁵Clowney, *The Church*, 191.

¹⁴⁶Duke, "The Christian Doctrine of Religious Liberty," 101.

¹⁴⁷Clowney, *The Church*, 188.

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 189.

This distinction also calls forth an associational component of religious liberty. Michael McConnell, a Christian legal and political philosopher, roots the ability of the church to associate freely amongst itself in the ability for the church to “select their own members by their own criteria.”¹⁴⁹ This rather self-evident truth about the church’s self-direction and self-consciousness assumes that the church’s self-determination of membership is exclusively that of the church. Such an idea carries with it the requirement that the church is free to explore its own self-understanding.

The notion of the church as an inherently free institution is bound up with idea of *libertas ecclesiae*.¹⁵⁰ Though a largely Catholic understanding of the church, its contours carry over to evangelical concerns. According to the idea of *libertas ecclesiae*, the church is free because of its status as a “*societas perfecta*, a society complete in itself” and unlike religious freedom, “generates a positive and not merely negative obligation on the part of the state.”¹⁵¹ The freedom the church espouses is not a freedom given to it by the state, or even in recognizing the legitimate authority of the state. The freedom of the church is grounded, ultimately, in the mission God has authorized to it.

Religious Liberty and the Free Exercise of the Church from Civil Coercion

Luke Bretherton comments on the negative aspect of the church being free from external constraint:

The church being the church is the refusal to allow the state to set the terms and conditions of entry into the public square: if the church, to be authentically itself, is a public political body which speaks its own language, then so be it. The state oversteps its proper limits when it seeks to determine when, where, and in what

¹⁴⁹Michael W McConnell, “Freedom by Association” *First Things* 225 (August 2012): 39, 41.

¹⁵⁰For more on this concept, see Douglas Farrow, *Desiring a Better Country: Forays in Political Theology* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 74-77; Richard W. Garnett, “‘The Freedom of the Church’: (Towards) an Exposition, Translation, and Defense,” *Journal of Contemporary Legal Issues* 21 (2013): 33-57.

¹⁵¹Farrow, *Desiring a Better Country*, 75-76.

voice the church may speak. Conversely, the church falsely limits itself when it only acts and speaks within the conditions set for it externally.¹⁵²

Bretherton's comments represent an astounding claim in freeing the church to be an ontologically distinct, politically independent entity through which ceding even the smallest aspects of its identity to state control is to forsake its identity entirely. This truth is foundational because it establishes the church as a free entity, rather than an entity granted freedom from the state as a subsidy.

Albornoz makes a similarly fascinating claim that an a priori assumption to the church's essential liberty helps reframe the starting point of questions of free exercise. He avers "religious liberty would not be ultimately based on the limitation of political authority but, inversely, the latter would flow from the freedoms which God has given man."¹⁵³ While Albornoz's claim relates to individual persons' responsibility before God, the same is true when applied to the church. Religious liberty is not chiefly about limiting the authority of the state, but is founded first in asking what the responsibility is of the church before God.

Social ethics and free exercise. The church rightly understanding its identity as the called-out people of God that grasps its understanding of its own ethics and the ability to perform those ethics bears crucial urgency and relevance to religious liberty before the watching world: It protects against misidentifying what the covenant community is. According to Stanley Hauerwas: "For the church is known by the character of people who constitute it, and if we lack that character, the world rightly draws the conclusions that the God we worship is in fact a false God."¹⁵⁴ The ability of

¹⁵²Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 54.

¹⁵³Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty*, 87.

¹⁵⁴Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 109.

the church to exercise its calling in society is essential to its identity. Where the church becomes an apparatus of civil religion and emptied of its eschatological orientation, the church's mission becomes a functionary of state and civil assistance.¹⁵⁵

Stanley Hauerwas's famous quip that "the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic" sheds light on the necessity and ability of the church to practice its ethics.¹⁵⁶ The essential nature of the church is grounded in its confession that Jesus is Lord. This confession, then, is outwardly displayed in the gathered and scattered life of the church. The church's display of the kingdom's ethics, which constitutes the church's calling in society, intersects with the need for the church to operate freely and unhindered. Hence the Apostle Paul's instruction to Timothy to pray for political leaders such that the church may "lead a peaceful and quiet life" (1 Tim 2:2). One imagines Paul making such an exhortation in hopes that the church will be unencumbered from government control in order to fulfill its mission.

Religious liberty and ecclesial usurpation. The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 appeals to the distinctiveness of the church to argue that its existence implies that it "should not resort to the civil power to carry on its own work. The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends."¹⁵⁷ The Baptist conviction on this matter is a historical outlier on the question of the state's involvement in church affairs. For fear of being too brief, the Constantinian question about using the state to further confessional ends pose one of the greatest historical questions the church has ever

¹⁵⁵Moots, *Politics Reformed*, 11, makes the incisive claim that to make religion politically innocuous or irrelevant attempts the articulation of religious without existential significance. If religion can be stripped of fundamental and absolute moral imperatives, usually drawn from eschatology, it will be less likely to conflict with the moral and political demands of competing political ideologies.

¹⁵⁶Hauerwas, *The Peaceable kingdom*, 99.

¹⁵⁷The Southern Baptist Convention, "Baptist Faith and Message 2000," accessed June 21, 2017, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>.

faced.¹⁵⁸ As a Baptist Christian, one can observe that Constantinianism had the positive effect of ending persecution against Christians, but the deleterious effect of making the state and church coterminous, that “the functions and methods of the two became largely the same.”¹⁵⁹ The Baptist Faith and Message rightfully declares that “no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by state more than others.”¹⁶⁰

To summarize, where the church fits in between the divisions of the kingdom from the kingdoms of the world and the eternal from the non-eternal raises crucial questions about ecclesiology and religious liberty. As this section has argued, it is the church that singularly bears witness to the reign of Christ, but doing so spiritually and not coercively in a secular age. The implication, thus, is that the church does not have the power to coerce faith, nor does the state have the jurisdiction or authority to pronounce what is or is not the proper marks of Christian identity. This new covenant identity assumes that “Right identification is essential to the new covenant, and it belongs exclusively to those who have assented to the Almighty.”¹⁶¹

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that religious liberty is an extension of Christian political witness by virtue of the kingdom of God’s primacy in biblical theology. It has argued that the kingdom of God establishes the authority of Christ to execute ultimate judgment on the conscience. Relatedly, the kingdom of God gives form to the nature of religious liberty in a present secular era while also assigning to the state its own

¹⁵⁸For an apologetic defense of Constantine’s impact on religious liberty, see Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010); Robert L. Wilken, “In Defense of Constantine,” *First Things* 112 (April 2001): 36-40. For early church documents related church-state configurations, see Agnes Cunningham, ed., *The Early Church and the State*, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

¹⁵⁹Hughey, “The Theological Frame of Religious Liberty,” 1367.

¹⁶⁰The Southern Baptist Convention, “Baptist Faith and Message 2000.”

¹⁶¹Leeman, *Political Church*, 266.

authorized mission and jurisdiction, which is to administer law and not encroach upon the conscience. It has also argued that a Christian doctrine of religious liberty accepts the legitimacy of contestability as a primary feature for present age. Lastly, this chapter has argued that the kingdom of God informs understandings of sovereignty, soteriology, and ecclesiology that are vital to forming a robust conception of religious liberty.

CHAPTER 3

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND THE IMAGE OF GOD: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ACCOUNT

What is humanity's ultimate end? Does humanity have a right to error over religious affairs and to have its error protected from government penalty? How or does humanity's powers of reason signify its unique status in creation? Toward what is humanity's freedom ultimately directed?

These are but a few of the questions relevant to the discussion of how humanity's status as creatures made in the image and likeness of God relate to a distinctly Christian formulation of religious liberty. At root, this question of religious liberty is anthropological. As this chapter will argue, the Christian understanding of the human person as made in the image of God best grounds an anthropological account for religious liberty that is distinctly Christian in origin.¹ Religious liberty, then, is not simply a political question; it is a reality emanating from a theology of creation—that humanity bears a unique origin, design, and purpose in its constitution. Many voices have argued similarly. Jim Spivey grounds religious liberty in a question of creation noting how “Religious liberty begins with the will of God as the creator of humanity.”² Matthew Franck likewise

¹Though the account is brief, Nicholas Wolterstorff attempts to make the “Christian Case for Religious Freedom” in Timothy Samuel Shah et al., *Religious Freedom: Why Now? Defending an Embattled Human Right* (Princeton, NJ: Witherspoon Institute, 2012), 39-41. Curiously, lacking from Wolterstorff's account is any distinguishable foundation that is inherently Christian. Wolterstorff argues for an account of religious liberty based on the authenticity of worship, natural rights and duties, and the dignity of the human person. While Wolterstorff argues for a Christian view of religious liberty on the grounds that the church is “born not of the flesh but of the spirit,” nothing in his account offers an anthropological foundation that a non-confessional theist could not also agree with. This is problematic for developing a Christian understanding of religious liberty rooted in a distinct vision of personhood grounded in the image of God.

²Jim Spivey, “Separation No Myth: Religious Liberty's Biblical and Theological Bases,”

posits that “the truth about religious freedom begins with men and women as *imago Dei*, the image of God.”³ This question of religious liberty and its importance to anthropology is one constitutive part of the paradigm of individual agency and personhood furnished from Christian doctrine. Larry Siedentop argues that Christianity birthed the idea of the individual itself.⁴ Jeremy Waldron argues that the image of God is the ground upon which humans “apprehend and participate in an intelligible order. Such a conception puts front and center the rational and moral capacities of the human being and their role in personal, social and political life.”⁵ Given the relevancies that the image of God bears to humanity’s nature, it should be unsurprising that it offers an attractive framework and touchstone to make religious liberty a distinctly Christian anthropological enterprise.

The subject of the image of God is of paramount importance to developing a biblical anthropology; and its significance to religious liberty is a preeminent entailment issuing from this reality. If the kingdom of God frames how Christians can uphold religious liberty from the perspective of the ultimate as the last chapter argued, it becomes necessary to determine how can Christians implement or appreciate a penultimate doctrine of religious liberty amongst their fellow man. The answer is the image of God, the anthropological starting ground for religious liberty. Because God’s image bearers are rational and volitional creatures endowed with both inviolable dignity

Southwestern Journal of Theology 36, no. 3 (1994): 10.

³Matthew J. Franck, “Two Tales: Getting the Origins of Religious Liberty Right Matters,” *Touchstone* 29, no. 4 (August 2016): 24.

⁴Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014). Siedentop’s volume is a masterful work highlighting the contribution of Christianity for developing the idea of individuality. According to Siedentop, the Christian understanding of male and female as made in the image of God offers an “ontological foundation for the ‘individual’, through the promise that humans have access to the deepest reality as individuals rather than merely as members of a group.” *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵Jeremy Waldron, “The Image of God: Rights, Reason, and Order,” in *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction*, ed. John Witte, Jr., and Frank S. Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 217.

and discerning consciences, humanity possesses qualities of being that make religious liberty constitutive of their truth-seeking nature. The ability for an image bearer to engage in conscious reflection about transcendent realities resulting in moral agency relies upon an assumption of freedom and what liberty such freedom has to be acted upon.

Ultimately, people bear God's image for the purpose of using their moral agency (i.e., freedom, reason) to reflect Christ's image more intensely. Thus, an anthropological account of religious liberty based on Christian grounds understands that such liberty is used for the sake of individuals being conformed into the image of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:29). This entails a connection between true personhood and what freedom hopes to attain. Anthony Hoekema argues that personhood and freedom are constitutive aspects of what it means to be created in the image of God:

To be a person means to be able to make decisions, to set goals, and to move in the direction of those goals. It means to possess freedom—at least in the sense of being able to make one's own choices. The human being is not a robot whose course is totally determined by forces outside him; he has the power of self-determination and self-direction. To be a person means, to use Leonard Verduin's picturesque expression, to be a "creature of option."⁶

By emphasizing the image-bearing worth of every created person, an approach to religious liberty that emphasizes the image of God as the foundation for religious liberty among persons means that error and idolatry can exist in a penultimate, contested era. Because Jesus is Lord of the conscience, this requires Christians to take a back-seat in penalizing or restricting any person's beliefs or convictions.

The purpose of this chapter is to put forward an anthropological account of religious liberty grounded in the doctrine of the image of God that finds ultimate telos in Jesus Christ, the image of God (Col 1:15; 2 Cor 4:4; Heb 1:3). As this chapter will argue, it is humanity created in God's image that provides the foundation and framework for positing a practical doctrine of religious liberty that is both intelligible and inviolable in a penultimate age.

⁶Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 5-6.

The argument of this chapter has five essential components. First, an overview will be provided that offers a brief summary of how bearing God's image in creation functions biblically. A definition and explanation of its meaning will then be explained and applied in the following sections. Second, the image of God will be explained in the context of humanity as both inherently religious and as ethical creatures designed for self-transcendence. Next, this chapter will argue that religious liberty supplies this view of humanity with moral agency. Fourth, attention will be given to how the image of God grounds a doctrine of human rights, which offers the best opportunity for securing religious liberty as an inviolably essential element to human integrity. Fifth, this chapter will explore a framework for explicating a Christian doctrine of religious liberty that demonstrates the relevance of religious liberty for all persons, religious or irreligious, grounded in the image of God.

The Image of God in Biblical Theology

The idea that humanity is created in the image of God as Genesis 1:26-27, 5:1, and 9:6 depict, represents the highest attribute and distinction that can be said about humanity's ontological status. From this doctrine emanates the most important concepts in distinguishing humanity from animal life and the rest of creation.

Plumbing the depths of the image of God in the Bible is no simple matter.⁷ Significant debate persists in scholarly literature as to the full meaning and implications of this doctrine, since the concept itself denotes both mystery and some ambiguity, because the Bible "nowhere fully defines what it means for people to be created in the

⁷For a review of literature concerning the doctrine of the image of God, see G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*; Philip Edcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999); John Laidlaw, *The Bible Doctrine of Man* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1895); John Gresham Machen, *The Christian View of Man* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1984); Hugh Dermot McDonald, *The Christian View of Man* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Boks, 1981).

image of God.”⁸ John Kilner argues that the image/likeness of God revolves around humanity’s connection with, and reflection of, God. He argues that that this doctrine reveals humanity to be God’s “crowning glory” of creation that reflects “who God is and what God does.”⁹ John Frame argues that God’s image constitutes humanity’s essential “resemblance” and “representation” of God.¹⁰ Grudem defines image bearing to mean that “man is like God and represents God” since the Hebrew for “image” (*tselem*) and “likeness” (*demut*) refer to something that resembles God, but is not identical with God.¹¹ Humanity is not synonymous with the image of God itself. The Bible avoids “stating that people simply are the image of God,” rather noting that “authors insert a preposition indicating that people stand in some relationship with God’s image—whether ‘in’ or ‘according to.’” This distinction is important because it forges a difference between humanity, which is made in God’s image, and Jesus Christ, the true image of God.¹²

⁸John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 95. For a review of the difficulty of developing a comprehensive understanding of the doctrine, see *ibid.*, 41-43. Wayne Grudem also offers a helpful discussion about the debates over the specific aspects of image bearing. Grudem argues that focusing on “image” and “likeness” is more helpful than narrow and specific meanings, because the Genesis text does not convey such specificity. Rather, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 442-43, rightly argues,

The text only needs to affirm that man is like God, and the rest of Scripture fills in more details to explain this. In fact, as we read the rest of Scripture, we realize that a full understanding of man’s likeness to God would require a full understanding of who God is in his being and in his actions and a full understanding of who man is and what he does. The more we know about God and man the more similarities we will recognize, and the more fully we will understand what Scripture means when it says that man is in the image of God. The expression refers to every way in which man is like God.

Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 67, also argues that the image of God has less to do with questions of what the image consists of, and more to do with grasping our role as mirrors and representatives of God.

⁹Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 39.

¹⁰John M. Frame, “Men and Women in the Image of God,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 225, 229.

¹¹Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 442-43.

¹²Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 88-89.

What, therefore, are the specific attributes of humanity being made in God's image? In what ways does humanity reflect God's image? Kilner argues that descriptions or attributes of being made in God's image have more to do with purposes and consequences of the teaching than what "actually defines" the image itself.¹³ As he writes, "Attributes are evidences of what it would look like to manifest God's image fully."¹⁴ Bearing God's image has more to do with the totality of one's status as a creation of God than functional attributes. Frame argues that "everything we are" somehow reflects God, even the totality of our nature itself. This includes our soul, body, reason, will, and goodness.¹⁵ Humans are not identical to God, but they are made to be like God in features such as their moral aspects, spiritual aspects, mental aspects, and relational aspects. Humans can know God in ways that the rest of creation cannot.¹⁶ Yet humanity is also unlike God in these capacities because of sin's distortion throughout the whole of our existence.

Relevant to the discussion of religious liberty, Frame situates the image of God as related to moral excellence and moral agency, thus constitutive to bearing God's image is our capacity for moral awareness:

Our reasoning power, creativity, ability to use language, ability to sense moral distinctions and to make moral choices, and above all our religious capacity distinguish us from animals and make us like God. But beyond these, remember the fundamental principle: everything we are images God.¹⁷

¹³Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 104.

¹⁴Ibid. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 105, writes, People do have abilities to be like God in certain ways because God has created them in the divine image. Getting the logical flow here is important. Such likenesses are not what it means to be in the image of God. Instead they are intended consequences of being in that image. They are among the purposes for which God has created humanity.

¹⁵Frame, "Men and Women in the Image of God," 225.

¹⁶Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 446-50.

¹⁷Frame, "Men and Women in the Image of God," 225-26.

For Frame, then, moral agency is a constitutive element to bearing God's image.

Representation is also central to bearing God's image. Bearing YHWH's image intensifies the idea of royal representation found in the Ancient Near East (ANE). There, to "image" bespeaks loyalty to the image the object bears. In biblical theology, Adam is to represent God as his vice-regent in the world, commissioned to exercise dominion and authority on God's behalf (Gen 1:28; 2:19).¹⁸

Theologians have attempted to organize different categories to understand the image of God. Millard Erickson has proposed the substantive, relational, and functional view.¹⁹ The substantive views God's image in humanity as bearing a "definite characteristic or quality within the make-up of the human."²⁰ The substantive view locates the image of God as something constitutive of humanity's overall nature. The relational view understands the image of God to convey the relational capacity that exists between individuals and God.²¹ The functional view assigns the image of God to a person's actions, particularly in exercising dominion over God's created world.²² The image of God is a product of what God has called humanity to accomplish. After weighing the strengths and weaknesses of the various positions, Erickson argues that the substantive viewpoint is most accurate:

The image is something in the very nature of humans, in the way in which they were made. It refers to something a human is rather than something a human has or does. By virtue of being human, one is in the image of God; it is not dependent upon the presence of anything else. By contrast the focus of the relational and functional views

¹⁸Frame, "Men and Women in the Image of God," 230-31.

¹⁹For an overview and evaluation of these three models, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 520-29.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 521.

²¹*Ibid.*, 523-27.

²²*Ibid.*, 529.

is actually on consequences or applications of the image rather than on the image itself.²³

My own view parallels most closely with Erickson's substantive view.

Anthony Hoekema in his classic volume *Created in God's Image*, combines image and likeness to render the expression as "an image which is like us." According to Hoekema, this indicates that humanity is a representation of God in certain aspects without there being the possibility of identifying humanity as the image itself.²⁴ Hoekema also argues for the "structural" and "functional" categories to bearing God's image. According to Hoekema, structural components of God's "image include his [humanity] gifts, capacities, and endowments" while the functional categories include "his actions, his relationship to God and to others, and the way he uses his gifts."²⁵

Jesus Christ as the Image of God

Discussion of the image of God carries over into the New Testament, giving full explanation and hermeneutical shape to the Old Testament's original rendering. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is revealed as the true image of God, not just made in the same likeness of God as humanity is. Where humanity bears the image of God, Christ is himself the image of God (Col 1:15; 2 Cor 4:4; Heb 1:3). According to Kilner,

Ultimately, the image of God is Jesus Christ. People are first created and later renewed according to that image. Image involves connection and reflection. Creation in God's image entails a special connection with God and an intended reflection of God. Renewal in God's image entails a more intimate connection with God through Christ and an increasingly actual reflection of God in Christ, to God's glory.²⁶

²³Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 532. Erickson goes on to state that the substantive position encompasses elements of the relational and functional view: "The image refers to the elements in the human makeup that enable the fulfillment of human destiny. The image is the powers of personality that make humans, like God, beings capable of interacting with other persons, of thinking and reflecting, and of willing freely." Ibid.

²⁴Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 13.

²⁵Ibid., 73.

²⁶Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, xi.

Image bearing is a vehicle that demonstrates the nature and fulfillment of human createdness and ultimately, salvation. In that sense, each individual bears God's image in hopes that they might mature into God's image, Jesus Christ. According to Paul, one's salvation enacts the process of sanctification, and sanctification is cast in New Testament categories of being conformed into image of Christ, thus the pathway of New Testament discipleship is believers becoming more like Jesus Christ. Christ and his moral perfection is thus the backdrop that helps discern and identify what it means to be made in the image of God (Rom 8:29; Col 3:10). As Christ is the true image, the path of Christian discipleship is being conformed to Christ's image (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18).²⁷ J. Daryl Charles observes that it is "Christ and Christ alone that brings ethical fullness to human beings."²⁸

Reason and God's Image: Preliminary Foundations

One of the central claims of this chapter is that humanity's moral agency—its ability to choose between right and wrong, to discern truth, to have the ability of self-transcendence—is central to a doctrine of religious liberty. That raises the necessary question of how reason functions in light of God's image. This question has provoked various views. As I will argue, whether one agrees with more ancient accounts that reason does constitute an essential attribute of bearing God's image, or with more contemporary accounts that reason is but one consequence of bearing God's image and

²⁷Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 92, states helpfully, Christ, as both the standard and the source of humanity's renewal, breaks the power of sin and liberates people to resume their God-intended development to become fully conformed to Christ—to God's image who is Christ. . . . Rather, being in God's "image" and "glory" are what God intends humanity fundamentally to be. Their destiny involves becoming that, though at present they are only en route.

²⁸J. Daryl Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 107.

less of a direct attribute, the larger concern is to anchor the intelligibility of reason as a central feature of human design that results from bearing God's image.

Whether it is a direct attribute or simply one consequence of being made in God's image, reason is nonetheless a priority to a Christian account of religious liberty that takes seriously humanity's nature as a truth-seeking creature. It is important to establish how reason is being used in this chapter, as it stands as a foundational concept to religious liberty throughout the rest of it.

Reason's relationship to image bearing. It is a consensus that early Christian theology onward placed an inordinate amount of focus on reason and the intellect as the most important element of bearing God's image. Waldron argues, "For almost the whole of the Christian era, *imago Dei* has been associated with man's capacity for practical reason."²⁹ While different voices equated reason with the image of God, others have understood reason to be a component or consequence of the image of God, thus giving reason an exalted status amongst other possible attributes. Reason was a dominant attribute of the image of God in the work of Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, Athanasius, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin. This is perhaps attributable to the influences of both Greek philosophy and scholasticism in the development of Christian theology.³⁰ The focus on reason is not unmerited, for as Hoekema observes, rational capacities "reflect God's reason, and enable man now, in a sense, to think God's thoughts after him. Man's moral sensitivity reflects something of the moral nature of God, who is the supreme determiner of right and wrong."³¹ Kilner has put forward strong objections to the notion that reason constitutes an essential, exact

²⁹Waldron, "The Image of God," 227.

³⁰For an overview and critique of Irenaeus's, Aquinas's, and Calvin's understanding of reason in relationship to the image of God, see Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 33-49. See also Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 178.

³¹Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 71.

attribute of God's image. Kilner's objection dethrones reason as the apex of humanity's image attributes, while upholding its importance.

According to Kilner, highlighting reason as the most crucial aspect of the image of God incorrectly foists theological and cultural influences onto the biblical text. He argues that the biblical text does not provide sufficient textual evidence to make reason an essential component of the image of God. "The key question," Kilner writes, is not "does it appear biblically sound to see people as 'uniquely rational, spiritual,' but instead, 'why should we think that this is what constitutes being in God's image?'"³² There is no direct reference in the Old or New Testament that would assign reason as the "primary concern."³³

Kilner also objects to equating the two because of the potential consequences for mentally handicapped people being denied their full dignity because of impaired reasoning skills or young or old persons whose reasoning capacities are not fully developed or have atrophied. Outsized emphasis on reason can also lead to downplaying the effects of sin on reason's ability. Importantly, it is here that Kilner make a provocative argument arguing sin "damages people greatly, but they continue straightforwardly in God's image."³⁴ "Christ as the image of God manifests knowledge and reason perfectly," but nowhere are individuals said to have their "image" renewed, but their entire self instead.³⁵ Kilner opposes identifying reason with the image of God since reason has been corrupted because of sin, but humanity's status as image bearers can never be denied. Distinguishing what constitutes image bearing is less important than preserving the overall economy of being an image bearer. Kilner also objects on the grounds that focusing on reason leads to

³²Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 181.

³³*Ibid.*, 183.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 185.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 184.

a spiritual-physical dichotomy, which the Bible rejects when looking at the totality of humanity as made in God's image.³⁶

Still, Kilner's objections to equating reason with the image of God do not erase the consequence of reason being a result of image bearing. Whether the image of God is one constitutive element or a consequence of bearing God's image, reason has immense significance because it reflects an ontological truth about humanity. Taking as our assumption this framework that understands reason as a consequence of bearing God's image for the remainder of the chapter, Kilner stipulates how reason bears significance to the image of God:

By creating humanity in God's image, God has created an unbreakable connection with humanity, with the intention that humanity would live with rational and spiritual attributes that in some small but wonderful measure reflect God's own. Reason, then, is one of the human attributes that ought to flow from being in the image of God—it is not, in itself, what constitutes being in God's image. It is a particularly strategic capacity since it is a prerequisite for other human attributes that flow from being in God's image, such as rulership and relationship. Because of sin, reason has not developed in people as God intended. That does not mean people are devoid of reason. Rather, it indicates that people's reason is distorted until Christ breaks the power of sin to allow reason to develop and function as God intends.³⁷

An underlying assumption of this paper, therefore, is that the image of God grounds the intelligibility of reason's significance without being necessarily coterminous with the image of God itself. This will have significant repercussions on the intersection of religious liberty and the image of God. It is the contention of this chapter that reason is a consequence or implication of bearing God's image, without encompassing the totality of God's image nor being the apex of God's image.

The Image of God and Humanity as Religious and Ethical

A central implication that follows from being made in God's image is the

³⁶Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 186.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 228.

moral and religious nature of humanity. Deemed “homo adorans”³⁸—the worshipping man, Scripture portrays humanity as a God-seeking creature. Paul declares in Acts 17:26-27: “And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.” Barrett Duke posits that it “seems reasonable to deduce from this passage that God intends for humans to have the freedom to search after him.”³⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson likewise argues that Paul’s statement is “remarkably positive toward the legitimacy of Gentile religious longing.”⁴⁰ Behind humankind’s religious nature stands an image of divine imprint that puts a longing for transcendence and alignment with transcendence inside every human heart. Augustine’s famous maxim, “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee” is thus an essential declaration of humanity’s nature in its search for God.⁴¹

According to a Christian view of human beings, the nature of individuals as beings created by God makes them inherently religious, such that humankind tries to “achieve a harmony with whatever transcendent order of reality there may be.”⁴² Sociologist Christian Smith calls human beings “believing animals.”⁴³ Cognitive science

³⁸Alexander Scheman, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimereer’s Seminary Press, 1973), 118.

³⁹Barrett Duke, “The Christian Doctrine of Religious Liberty,” in *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Liberty*, ed. Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B & H, 2016), 96.

⁴⁰Luke Timothy Johnson, “Religious Rights and Christian Texts,” in *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective*, ed. John Witte, Jr., and Johan van der Vyver (The Hague: Martin Nijhoff, 1996), 87.

⁴¹Augustine, *Confessions*, vol. 1: *Books 1-8*, trans. Carolyn J. B. Hammond (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 3.

⁴²Shah et al., *Religious Freedom*, 12.

⁴³Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

also affirms that religion and the answer for meaning it provides is deeply embedded in human nature.⁴⁴ The reality of humanity's inherent religious and ethical nature means that the place of religion takes on a "radically architectonic status in an agent's life."⁴⁵ By this, religion becomes an animating center of a person's existence. "The good of religion," writes Christopher Tollefsen, "will now potentially be implicated in every possible circumstance calling for choice."⁴⁶

Questions about the religious and moral nature of individuals necessitate questions of how that nature is exercised. Indeed, if religious impulse is a constitutive element to humanity's design, tampering with religious nature constitutes a violation of essential nature:

To repress religion, then is not to frustrate some odd quirk or human nature, somehow separable from the "true" interests of human beings. Instead, it is to repress the variable yet inevitable religious choices and experiences of actual human beings. Because religious beliefs and social practices have proven so ineradicable, so *natural* in their immense variety and mutability, to repress them is to repress human dignity itself. Religious repression is the denial of the very essence of what it means to be human.⁴⁷

The authors of *Religious Freedom: Why Now* offer the sober observation that "religion is so profoundly intertwined with human existence that it cannot be repressed except at the price of undermining individuality and disrupting society."⁴⁸ If religious impulse is intrinsic to human experience because of the divine spark behind humanity's nature, the moral and religious conclusions that free persons arrive at must be voluntary;

⁴⁴For insight into the relationship between religion and human nature in cognitive disciplines, see Justin L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2004); Jesse Bering, *The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012).

⁴⁵Christopher Tollefsen, "Conscience, Religion and the State," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 54, no. 1 (January 2009): 100.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷Shah et al., *Religious Freedom*, 15.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

that is, a community cannot believe on behalf of an individual, nor can conclusions be inflicted on an individual that they themselves did not grasp on their own. Only a doctrine of humanity that takes seriously the image of God as the foundation for religious inquiry can furnish a doctrine of religious liberty that sees religious instinct as an inseparable, integral aspect of human fulfillment.

Religion functions in this capacity not only as a vehicle where humanity derives ultimate meaning, but also sets out to live in accordance with this meaning. Religious belief provides the individual with an ethos for life in the world. As Pope Benedict XVI declared, commenting on the ethical component of religious liberty: “Religious freedom should be understood, then, not merely as immunity from coercion, but even more fundamentally, as an ability to order one’s choices in accordance with truth.”⁴⁹ This principle parallels the Apostle Paul’s understanding that religious beliefs results in performative ethics that demonstrate fidelity to one’s belief (Rom 12:1-2; 1 Cor 10:31). The inability to live out the deepest convictions of an individual’s belief system represents a violation of self-possession. Sidney Greidanus is correct to observe that

freedom of religion will require freedom of choice in every area of life, freedom to respond in a way that is consistent with one’s religious beliefs. The Bible clearly teaches that a choice for the covenant of God must direct subsequent choices in every area of life.⁵⁰

The lack of freedom to engage in religious devotion thus represents a fundamental thwarting of human nature and human fulfillment.

The Image of God and Moral Agency

According to Larry Siedentop, “Individual agency acquires roots in divine

⁴⁹Benedict XVI, “44th World Day of Peace 2011, Religious Freedom, the Path to Peace,” *The Vatican*, January 1, 2011, accessed August 14, 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20101208_xliv-world-day-peace.html.

⁵⁰Sidney Greidanus, “Human Rights in Biblical Perspective,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 19, no. 1 (April 1984): 29.

agency.”⁵¹ The link between these two realities is a doctrine of humanity and moral agency—and culpability—rooted in God’s image.

The nature of the individual’s moral agency is of incalculable significance to the question of religious liberty. This question of moral agency is rooted fundamentally in “God’s nature and in his dealing with persons.”⁵² By moral agency, this refers to the status of the person as a free, rational creature whose ability to grasp moral truth and live in accord with this truth furnishes foundational aspects of that personhood. Agency bespeaks the totality of personhood. Moral agency implies the many “dimensions of one’s personhood—reason, conscience, will, emotions, body, and soul.”⁵³ These are implications from the ontological createdness of humanity. And it is this createdness that, according to Matthew Franck, posits a doctrine of religious liberty.⁵⁴ Similarly, James Spivey centers the question of creation and humanity’s status as an image bearer in configuring religious liberty’s significance:

Being created in God’s image, each person possesses infinite dignity and is a rational, moral agent with a conscience capable of responding to him by faith. Faith is a gift from God, not of human origin or institutional fabrication. This faith elicits voluntary obedience from the rational soul: the equal and independent right of every person to choose without coercion. The individual conscience is sovereign before people, but it is neither independent from God nor controlled entirely by the person. Conscience bears a divine imprimatur which, beyond human will, brings awareness of God and conviction of divine law.⁵⁵

If human beings are anything less than free to reach their own conclusions by way of reason and conscience, conclusions are only tenuously held with sincerity.

⁵¹Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*, 64.

⁵²James E. Wood, “A Biblical View of Religious Liberty,” *The Ecumenical Review* 30, no. 1 (January 1978): 32.

⁵³Shah et al., *Religious Freedom*, 16.

⁵⁴I recommend Matthew Franck’s essay on the competing origins of religious liberty. Franck, “Two Tales”; Matthew J. Franck, “Christianity and Freedom in the American Founding,” in *Christianity and Freedom: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Allen D. Hertzke and Timothy Samuel Shah, Cambridge Studies in Law and Christianity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1: 264-89.

⁵⁵Spivey, “Separation No Myth,” 10.

Essential features that follow from being made in God's image are denied and true personhood degraded when individual agency is downplayed or negated.

The following sections discuss how moral agency implies freedom, rational choice, and responsibility for one's choice. Each of these are components of what it means to be made in God's image as a moral agent and are implicit in a doctrine of religious liberty.

Freedom

Human freedom is grounded in bearing God's image, but "true freedom is spiritually based and originates in the person of Jesus Christ."⁵⁶ Human freedom is the ground of our ultimate responsibility as creatures before God.⁵⁷ As those who image God, the ultimate pursuit of human freedom is greater conformity to Jesus Christ. Human conformity into Christ's image requires the freedom to exercise the faculties that make sanctification and maturity in Christ possible. Thus, freedom is not an ancillary aspect of human nature, but an element of God's plan for humanity to enjoy relationship with him (2 Cor 3:7; Rom 8:21; Gal 5:1).⁵⁸ Amos Wilder observes that biblical language of "repent," "follow me," "choose this day," "believe in thy heart," and "return" all signify the eschatological nature of humanity's freedom before God.⁵⁹ As Siedentop observes, "For if faith in the Christ can free humans from the bondage of sin, then each must have a

⁵⁶Wood, "A Biblical View of Religious Liberty," 32. See also Spivey, "Separation No Myth," 10.

⁵⁷Amos Niven Wilder, "Eleutheria in the New Testament and Religious Liberty," *The Ecumenical Review* 13, no. 4 (July 1961): 412.

⁵⁸A. F. Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty* (New York: Association Press, 1963), 78-79, writes,
Man is liberated in Jesus Christ in order that he may live a life of obedience to God. In the freedom to which God has called him, man is to become God's fellow-worker in the fulfillment of this obedience. There is, then, in our due Christian obedience, a relationship between God and man which is based on freedom.

⁵⁹Wilder, "Eleutheria in the New Testament and Religious Liberty," 413.

potential for freedom, a free will.”⁶⁰ Freedom is thus “transcendent” and “existential” because it calls for an “eschatological summons” in response to God’s revelation.⁶¹ If the gospel calls for greater conformity into Christ’s image, then religious liberty—not seen primarily through the prism of political order, but through theological lenses—is the foundation that allows image bearers to reach their highest purpose. Indeed, as Phillip Wogaman argues, “unless man is externally free to bear witness to God, the inner intention of the covenant between God and man remains frustrated.”⁶²

It is at this critical juncture that religious liberty participates in the important debates over pitting “creation ethics” versus “kingdom ethics.”⁶³ This bifurcation has been addressed in the work of Oliver O’Donovan, whose emphasis on the resurrection as the reaffirmation of the created order’s intelligibility, helps clarify the importance of religious liberty. If one’s capacity as a created, rational being is understood as a predicate to religious liberty, then the reality of redemption brings even greater urgency to the question and purpose of image bearing. “We must speak about creation” O’Donovan writes, “because in Jesus’s resurrection God has given back the created world.”⁶⁴ Humans are created beings made to reflect Jesus Christ. This reality, the reality of both creation and redemption, supplies religious liberty with the needed justification for its Christocentric dimensions:

It might have been possible, we could say, before Christ rose from the dead, for someone to wonder whether creation was a lost cause. If the creature consistently acted to uncreate itself, and with itself to uncreate the rest of creation, did this not mean that God’s handiwork was flawed beyond hope of repair? It might have been

⁶⁰Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*, 69.

⁶¹Wilder, “Eleutheria in the New Testament and Religious Liberty,” 413.

⁶²J. Philip Wogaman, *Protestant Faith and Religious Liberty* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967), 65.

⁶³Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), xv.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, xvii.

possible before Christ rose from the dead to answer in good faith, Yes. Before God raised Jesus from the dead, the hope that we call ‘gnostic,’ the hope for redemption from creation rather than for the redemption *of* creation, might have appeared to be the only possible hope. ‘But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead (1 Cor 15:20). That fact rules out those other possibilities, for in the second Adam the first is repaired.’⁶⁵

O’Donovan’s argument is critical for establishing why an account of freedom grounded in the goodness of creation by virtue of the resurrection is critical to religious liberty. In Colossians 3:10, the apostle Paul refers back to the redeemed self as the agent “being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” Being that human destiny, which is fulfilled by knowing God in Christ, originates with humanity’s initial purpose, it is possible to deduce that the freedom to respond to the gospel supplies image bearers with the requisite capacity to respond to the gospel, and into greater conformity with Christ. All of this is, it is worth stressing, grounded in the reality of humanity bearing a distinct mark given to it at its creation. A re-affirmed creation established by Jesus’s bodily resurrection means that each individual image bearer as a created being requires the freedom to engage their moral agency with the highest possible good: Redemption in Christ. Religious liberty is thus animated toward the truth of redemption, and redemption includes the capacity as those who bear God’s image to recognize the fulfillment of their image in Jesus Christ. As O’Donovan says, “We must complete our account of Christian freedom by saying that the Spirit forms and brings to expression the appropriate pattern of free response to objective reality.”⁶⁶ Because Christians believe that created beings are made truly in the image of God, their freedom is fundamental to their salvation. Humans have supernatural ends to their existence, of which freedom is a prerequisite to its fulfillment.⁶⁷ A statement by the World Council of Churches in 1960 echoes the teleological nature of freedom in relationship to Christ:

⁶⁵O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 14.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 35. Critically, O’Donovan again asserts that resurrection as foundational to understanding the world: “So it is that Christian ethics, too, looks both backwards and forwards, to the

In Jesus Christ, God has both restored and redeemed his human creation, made in his own image. A particular man was and is the bearer of God's majesty and purpose. In Jesus Christ, he has called humanity to a destiny for the pursuit of which every man must be free.⁶⁸

Freedom is about no less than questions concerning the ordering of political communities, but more foundationally, freedom is oriented toward a greater purpose and higher plane; and that purpose of bearing God's image culminates toward the New Testament's witness that Christ is the image of God. Questions of this nature capture how religious liberty is often abstracted from critical aspects of Christian theology. Christians can defend a robust account of religious freedom on the grounds that image bearing persons are meant to hear and respond to the gospel with the totality of their personhood to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

If freedom is not used in order to bring one closer to Christ, the ultimate purpose of freedom is not fulfilled. At the same time, as there is an ultimate use of one's freedom, there is a penultimate use of one's freedom that issues from being made in the image of God. The penultimate use of freedom is to use one's reason to respond to the conscience's apprehension of either moral or religious obligation. A defense of religious freedom for non-Christians issues, then, from the reality that one hopes the non-Christian would use the availability of freedom to come to the knowledge that all would be saved and "come to knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). But again, the ultimate use of one's freedom is bound up with God's calling on humanity, which is to reflect his perfect image, Jesus Christ (Heb 1:3). Albornoz writes that the "revelation of God in Jesus Christ requires a free response and, therefore, any other kind of response is incompatible with its intrinsic nature."⁶⁹ Carl F. H. Henry argues that salvation in Christ frees humanity from

origin and to the end of the created order. It respects the natural structures of the world, while looking forward to their transformation." O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 58.

⁶⁸*Christian Statement on the Nature and Basis of Religious Liberty* (St. Andrews, Scotland: World Council of Churches, 1960).

⁶⁹Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty*, 147. He continues on the same page, noting, "This free response is compatible with God's judgment and with the teachings of the enslavement

sin and reflects the reality that “creation itself will one day be set free supernaturally for the liberty for which it now yearns.”⁷⁰

James Wood observes that “freedom is primarily, or in essence, an inner state, in which no external authority may exercise control over a person.”⁷¹ In no sense can a person be understood as religiously free if he or she can be compelled to agree or reject moral or religious convictions at which they did not voluntarily arrive. Neither can faith be effectuated by coercion. In the words of John Locke, “All the life and power of religion consists in the inward and full persuasion of the mind; and faith is not faith without believing.”⁷² The inner freedom of human beings as rational image-bearing creations also serves as the foundation for a social doctrine of religious liberty. Because people are in their essence made to be free, society and the institutions of society are at best ineffectual to coerce belief, and at worst, totalitarian in bringing aspects of the world under its sway where no such biblical junction permits it.⁷³ Carl F. H. Henry argues that freedom is essential to “voluntary faith, including the right to change one’s religion without penalty.”⁷⁴ God desires “voluntary spiritual allegiance” since, according to Henry, “coerced decision is of little spiritual value.”⁷⁵ It is also accurate that coerced

of man’s will by sin and the mystery of election.”

⁷⁰Carl F. H. Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society: Promoting Evangelical Renewal & National Righteousness* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1984), 73.

⁷¹Wood, “A Biblical View of Religious Liberty,” 32.

⁷²John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. James H. Tully (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 12.

⁷³On the rise of “dual jurisdictions” in Christian developments of religious liberty, see Steven D. Smith, *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 37.

⁷⁴Carl F. H. Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization: The Drift toward Neo-Paganism* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), 175.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 176.

belief is false belief, which undermines the principle of personal moral agency.

According to John Finnis, in the event that religious liberty is quenched, “We are unable to be authentic, and fail to make our actions genuine realizations of our own freely ordered evaluations, preferences, hopes and self-determination.”⁷⁶

Freedom also concerns how God reveals himself to individuals and their response to him. “An essential characteristic of the gospel,” writes Wood, “is that God has chosen to make himself known in love and that, therefore, he does not use force to win our allegiance.”⁷⁷ The very coming of the Lord Jesus in humility, rather than triumph, captures God’s posture toward humanity. The incarnation is a reflection of God’s humility in bringing his mission to earth through an infant.⁷⁸ Søren also illustrates this point, writing that “the basis of religious liberty is the very fact that Christ did not come in heavenly splendor and worldly majesty to subjugate any possible resistance and for all and everybody to subjection.”⁷⁹ Wood continues,

For faith to be faith, it must be voluntary, personal, and free act, an act born of freedom. Faith is not faith if its voluntary character is abridged by coercion. Freedom is integrally bound up with God’s revelation of himself and in his relations with persons. In God’s very disclosure of himself, freedom is a part of that revelation.⁸⁰

Freedom, then, is not simply the exercise of one’s choice. Freedom, rather, is a comprehensive estate understood as constitutive to image bearing and personhood. Søren

⁷⁶John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 88.

⁷⁷Wood, “A Biblical View of Religious Liberty,” 33.

⁷⁸For more on the relationship between the Incarnation and religious liberty, see James Davis’ explication of Roger Williams’ focus on the Incarnation as evidence that God’s kingdom comes not through political power, but through a renewed covenant with humanity. James Calvin Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams: Christian Conviction and Public Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 22-29.

⁷⁹Niels Søren, “The Theological Basis of Religious Liberty,” *The Ecumenical Review* 11, no. 1 (October 1958): 40.

⁸⁰Wood, “A Biblical View of Religious Liberty,” 34.

Kierkegaard's reflection demonstrates that at the core of human personhood is an irreducible necessity for freedom. Freedom becomes a benchmark that expresses the underlying totality of humanity's nature:

Man is himself primarily and genuinely in his free choice. If then our Lord will draw people to himself, he cannot force them to surrender. For then he would not get their real selves, but something different. Then he would have drawn the object of his 'drawing' in away from their own selves in such a way that finally he would not have them drawn, but changed into a kind of impersonal machinery.⁸¹

Kierkegaard's instruction on this matter is a central tenet to developing a theological anthropology that understands freedom as an essential aspect of humanity's existence, for which, if negated, robs humanity of fundamental integrity and dignity as made creatures made in the image of God.

A biblical account of religious liberty must also consider the impact to freedom of sin's effect on humanity. As Barrett Duke notes, because individuals are fallen, "people are incapable of fully interpreting the will of God in all matters for other people, and they are certainly incapable of properly enforcing spiritual standards."⁸² A doctrine of sin, therefore, functions as a reminder that "the sinful nature of man negates the possibility of the absolutizing of human authority, religious or political, and by limiting all human authority provides an important foundation for religious liberty."⁸³ While sin results from distorting one's freedom, sin also acts as a buffer against earthly claims of infallibility. A doctrine of religious liberty, then, must take heavy stock of humanity's sinful proclivities and intentions to coerce, punish, or absolutize religious faith on the unbelieving.

In the end, deducing the significance and priority of freedom is essential to distilling the consequences that follow from bearing God's image:

⁸¹Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 55.

⁸²Duke, "The Christian Doctrine of Religious Liberty," 95.

⁸³Wood, "A Biblical View of Religious Liberty," 37.

True freedom is whole and, indivisible—it embraces political freedom, moral freedom, spiritual freedom, freedom of thought, freedom of belief, freedom of expression, free enterprise, a free press, free elections, but supremely freedom to perform the will of God. Religious freedom is basic to all else; it offers humankind not only freedom not to worship Caesar, but freedom to worship Caesar's God, who is the ground of all human duties and rights.⁸⁴

Henry's understanding of freedom offers a rich account for its centrality to human experience.

In conclusion, image bearing is of foremost importance to the question of religious liberty because true freedom and true humanity is bound up in the culminating reality of Christ as the true image of God. Freedom is freedom toward a particular telos or purpose. Hence, passages that deal with liberty in the Scriptures posit liberty's fulfillment in direct relationship to Jesus Christ (John 8:36; Acts 13:38-39; Rom 6:22, 8:1-4; 1 Cor 6:12; 2 Cor 3:17; Gal 5:1 and 13-14; Eph 3:12; 1 Pet 2:16). Therefore, image bearing, as it relates to religious liberty, is oriented toward the ability to know Christ as the perfect image. Thus, the image of God has less to do with questions of reason, and more with the use of our freedom to discern who the God-Man, Jesus Christ, really is.⁸⁵ Christians require a Christological component to religious liberty not only in the eschatological fulfillment of time and judgment, but because anthropologically, true freedom orients persons toward liberation in Christ, who is God's perfect image. The freedom to exercise one's liberty in Christ is contingent upon experiencing liberating freedom from sin, accomplished through uncoerced consciences and wills.

Reason and Rationality

Much of reason has already been alluded to thus far, but only in framing its place in the overall economy of bearing God's image. Its role and purpose in relationship to the image of God and religious liberty demand further explanation. The image of God cannot be discussed apart from the capacities that follow from being made in God's

⁸⁴Carl F. H. Henry, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?* (Nashville: ERLC, 1996), 48.

⁸⁵Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 22.

image. One enormously important factor of the image of God in humanity is the decision by God to make rational creatures. According to Henry,

Knowledge of God is indeed wholly dependent upon divine revelation, but man was divinely made with rational and moral aptitudes for intelligible communication with his Maker and for the joyous service of God. The possibility of man's knowledge of divine revelation rests in the created capacity of the human mind to know the truth of God, and the capacity of thought and speech that anticipates intelligible knowledge and fellowship. Man's rationality is therefore one span of the epistemological bridge whereby he knows theological truth. That man's reason is a divine gift for recognizing God's truth is a main tenet of the Christian faith. Human reason was a divine endowment enabling man to have knowledge of God and his purposes in the universe. The functions of reason—whether concepts, forms of implication, deduction and induction, judgment and conclusions, and whatever else—are not simply a pragmatic evolutionary development but fulfill a divine intention and purpose for man in relation to the whole realm of knowledge.⁸⁶

Henry's argument is forceful, for in it, he captures how reason is a principal component of the epistemological relationship between God and humanity. Reason demonstrates that human beings are “free to think for [themselves] and [are] responsible to God for the use of [their] intellect.”⁸⁷ It is also considered a cognitive ability wherein persons can “apprehend something of God himself and his order and purpose in the world.”⁸⁸ Reason is a central fixture in the responsibility of individuals before the revelation of God. Persons may discern truths of general and special revelation because they possess reason. Erickson writes that “reason has been singled out by theologians as the most significant aspect of human nature.”⁸⁹ Such a statement can be made, again,

⁸⁶Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 1:227. Henry continues,

Not even the cataclysmic moral tragedy of the fall has wholly demolished man's capacity for knowing God and his revealed truth. Scripture emphasizes that God's general revelation, in nature and in reason and in conscience, penetrates into the very mind of man. Man is therefore all the more guilty since he personally spurns it. All God's revelation is intelligible revelation; his special scriptural revelation is communicated in truth and words.

⁸⁷John David Hughey, “The Theological Frame of Religious Liberty,” *The Christian Century* 80, no. 45 (November 1963): 1365.

⁸⁸Waldron, “The Image of God,” 227.

⁸⁹Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 521.

without reducing reason to image bearing. For argument's purposes here, it is the use of humanity's reason by which it is held accountable to God.

Concerning religious liberty, and that which follows from being made in God's image, reason and rationality are integral to the integrity of the conscience and the faculties of the mind. While not defended in explicitly Christian terms, one of America's architects of religious freedom, James Madison, provides helpful insight into the integrity of reason and rationality that complements a Christian understanding of humanity's cognitive nature as bearing God's image:

As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed. As long as the connection subsists between his reason and his self-love, his opinions and his passions will have a reciprocal influence on each other; and the former will be objects to which the latter will attach themselves. The diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate, is not less an insuperable obstacle to a uniformity of interests. The protection of these faculties is the first object of government. From the protection of different and unequal faculties of acquiring property, the possession of different degrees and kinds of property immediately results; and from the influence of these on the sentiments and views of the respective proprietors, ensues a division of the society into different interests and parties.⁹⁰

Madison avers that the job of government is not to promote diversity *qua* diversity, as though all opinions that consciences reach are equally true as though fashioning an ethic of relativism. Rather, the job of government is to recognize and protect the free exercise of one's cognitive faculties.⁹¹ Madison states that the duty of government is to respect the individuals as a rational creature whose reason directs him or her toward intelligible ends. Thus, it is the responsibility of the government to recognize and protect aspects of personhood that uphold the integrity of personhood. Reason, used properly or even improperly, is one such implication from bearing God's image that is a human good.

⁹⁰Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers No. 10*, ed. Clinton Rossiter and Charles R. Kessler (New York: Penguin, 2003), 73.

⁹¹I owe this insight to an essay on the philosophical underpinnings of the American founding by Robert R. Reilly, "For God and Country," *Claremont Review of Books* 17, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 46.

The use of reason, though, is not simply abstract or theoretical. Rather, reason is also “practical,” in that the ability to apprehend truth “involves also the ability to shape our lives and actions in according with that apprehension.”⁹² Reason is “passionate [and] ordered to our ultimate end in the presence of God.”⁹³

Like freedom, reason and rationality are not divorced from Christological categories. One of the paramount truths of Christology is the logos of God being Jesus Christ (John 1:1-3). Jesus is the divine ordering principle of the universe and also the image of God. He is the reason that reason exists and is an intelligible operation of the mind (Col 1:15-20). If the image of God is Christ, and the logos of God is Jesus Christ, the use of reason is directed and fulfilled in reason’s grasp of Jesus Christ. Siedentop makes the compelling argument that it is Christ himself who makes reason and rationality intelligible:

Individual rationality, rationality in all equally, is purchased at the price of submitting to God’s will as revealed in the Christ. . . . In the Christ, both the power of God and the wisdom of God are revealed. Jesus is the Christ because his death and resurrection give humans, as individuals, access to the mind and will of God.⁹⁴

Human use of reason is meant to reflect the divine mind of the Trinity, that the person exercising their reason might come to understand the mystery of saving faith.

Conscience

Aside from the inner conviction of religion that cannot be coerced and the dignity of humans as made in the image of God, one of the early “roots” of religious freedom was the conscience.⁹⁵ Gary T. Meadors defines conscience as

⁹²Waldron, “The Image of God,” 228.

⁹³Roger Ruston, *Human Rights and the Image of God* (London: SCM, 2004), 47.

⁹⁴Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*, 64.

⁹⁵Robert Louis Wilken, “The Christian Roots of Religious Freedom,” in *Christianity and Freedom*, 1: 69.

an aspect of self-awareness that produces the pain and/ or pleasure we ‘feel’ as we reflect on the norms and values we recognize and apply. Conscience is not an outside voice. It is an inward capacity humans possess to critique themselves because the Creator provided this process as a means of moral restraint for his creation.⁹⁶

The conscience is a moral component to humanity bearing God’s image.⁹⁷ The conscience is an additional aspect of our createdness that distinguishes humanity from the rest of creation. According to Carl Henry:

Man differs at one essential point from all other creatures. He alone bears the *imago Dei*—the image of God. Only he has, as part of his essential nature, the forms of reason and morality. Only he is given a distinctive content of knowledge. Because he is so made, he cannot escape ethical responsibility. . . . This intriguing phrase—the *imago Dei*—is not an archaic Latinism; it embraces the essential nature of man as he is on the basis of creation. Hebrew-Christian thought views the *imago Dei* with primary emphasis on the conscience. It holds to an unchanging moral standard on the basis of Divine creation and preservation. And it says that man possesses an ineradicable ethical content. But it does not limit man’s knowledge to this aspect of experience. The moral *imago* does not stand alone. It is part of a comprehensive Divine-human relationship that distinguishes man as unique in the creature world. The *imago* embraces at one the forms of rational as well as of moral experience and a knowledge of God as the Truth and as the Good. The *imago* cannot be broken up so that moral experience on the basis of creation takes place in a vacuum, unrelated to reason and distinct from an awareness of God. On the contrary, the feeling that God is, the forms of reason and morality, the innate possession of certain moral convictions are elements of one whole. All that factors condition each other. The moral *imago* is at once rational and religious. The rational *imago* is part of man’s experience as a moral and religious being. And the reason for this is that the image of man bears the image of God. The consequence is that man is made with a religious reason and a religious ethical nature. That is why his revolt against truth and against the good is at one and the same time a revolt against God.⁹⁸

Henry’s comment helpfully explains the centrality of rationality to the existence of the conscience and how both operations function in tandem with being made in the image of God. As Albornoz helpfully defines it, the conscience is “our imminent and

⁹⁶Gary Meadors, “Conscience,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 115.

⁹⁷Andrew David Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 22.

⁹⁸Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 151-52.

native faculty for reaching moral judgments, conclusions, and decisions.”⁹⁹ It is the “last norm and rule of action and decision.”¹⁰⁰ The conscience acts as a buffer between the individual and whatever authority structures would seek to tamper or impede the conscience. Indeed, historically, “the recognition of conscience, in turn, created the possibility of moral appeal against imposed authority—whether by church or state.”¹⁰¹ Conscience can be considered the “inner voice” of a person that brings about “natural moral sense” which “incites or binds” individuals in their moral agency.¹⁰² Conscience is the internal guide God placed inside of each person to discern moral judgment. As one evangelical scholar put it, religious liberty acts as a “moral firewall” that protects the rights of conscience.¹⁰³

From a person’s conscience, authentic expression of a person’s convictions becomes intelligible—the wellspring of conviction that animates a person’s life. From the conscience, Chris Tollefsen argues, issues our “final verdict on how we are to constitute ourselves.”¹⁰⁴ Further, according to Tollefsen, conscience plays a two-fold role in how individuals constitute themselves as God’s image bearers. First, individual conscience helps render judgment on what a person deems is true, prohibited, or obligatory based on the moral law—the “law written on their hearts” (Rom 2:15). Secondly, from that

⁹⁹Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty*, 29.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁰¹Charles Villa-Vicencio, “Christianity and Human Rights,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 14, no. 2 (1999): 587.

¹⁰²Wilken, “The Christian Roots of Religious Freedom,” 69. For an overview of how “conscience” has functioned in relationship to religious liberty throughout church history, see *ibid.*, 69-70.

¹⁰³I am indebted to Rosaria Butterfield for this phrase.

¹⁰⁴Tollefsen, “Conscience, Religion and the State,” 95. See also Patrick Lee and Robert P. George, “The Nature and Basis of Human Dignity,” *Ratio Juris* 21 (2008): 173-93.

judgment, freedom is needed, since freedom is a “capacity exercised in our choices to act as conscience dictates.”¹⁰⁵

Centrally important to the question of how our conscience functions in relationship to the image of God, this two-fold aspect of the conscience is what distinguishes humanity from animals and the rest of creation. The self-constituting nature of the conscience helps humanity understand itself as “persons, not things, creatures with dignity, and subjects of rights, beings made in the image of God.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, the conscience is derived from humanity’s creational status as an image bearer. It results from being made in the image of God and further differentiates humanity from the rest of creation.

The conscience sits as the central place for decision making and judgement on the part of the individual. According to Wood, “Man’s one and only means of learning God’s will for him is the voice of his own conscience.”¹⁰⁷ From the perspective of the image of God, the conscience represents the spark of moral and religious intuition that brings individuals into conformity with God’s will or in rebellion to God’s will. Thus, the nature of the conscience is ordered toward truth, regardless of whether truth is fully grasped. A harbinger of the conscience, then, is its essential freedom. Defending the conscience in this capacity is meant to defend the freedom of the faculty of the conscience, not the conclusions that the conscience reaches.

Moreover, the conscience is not a morally neutral center of operation. According to Scripture, the consciences can be seared, and driven by sub-rational instincts that override the conscience, thus implying guilt (1 Tim 4:2; Heb 10:22). Scripture depicts the conscience as an operation in need of redemption.¹⁰⁸ A defense of the conscience’s

¹⁰⁵Tollefsen, “Conscience, Religion and the State,” 95.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Wood, “A Biblical View of Religious Liberty,” 36.

¹⁰⁸For a recent evangelical volume on the conscience, see Naselli and Crowley, *Conscience*.

freedom is not a defense of the sanctity or praiseworthiness of the conscience itself. Consciences go awry. Offering a defense for the conscience is not to sanction it, nor is it to grant a “right” to blaspheme God. Rather, a defense of the conscience is grounded in the belief that “no one should be compelled to act contrary to conscience” and that “no divine or good power motivates one to act against conscience.”¹⁰⁹ In this sense, from the perspective of the Christian, a person has a penultimate negative right to religious freedom. It is less a “positive” right that affirms all religious inclinations, and more a negative right not to be coerced because those with erring consciences, though in error, are under belief that they are acting truthfully—even if in error.

According to Wood, “Because freedom of conscience is essential to one’s personhood in the image of God and one’s way of response to God, no one should be compelled to act contrary to one’s conscience.”¹¹⁰ Conscience is essential to a Christian understanding of personhood because conscience, as the moral driver of rationality, is what distinguishes humanity from the rest of creation. The operation of the conscience helps individuals solve the greatest mystery of their existence: To whom do I belong? To God? To natural law? To some concept of the common good? A Christian conception of conscience is not of hyper self-autonomy. Rather, conscience is the thing to which individual will be obedient in the pursuit of transcendent meaning.

Philosopher Christopher Tollefsen accurately states the importance of being able to exercise one’s convictions based on one’s belief:

The exercise of conscience—the making of the moral judgments that is necessary to these enterprises—and the pursuit of religion, thus have a claim to be the most central aspects of an agent's attempts at upright self-constitution, aspects which, if intruded upon in unreasonable ways, would cut to the heart of an agent's ability to act, and constitute herself as, a person.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 72.

¹¹⁰Wood, “A Biblical View of Religious Liberty,” 36.

¹¹¹Tollefsen, “Conscience, Religion and the State,” 100. Tollefsen continues on the judgment of conscience and the centrality of religion to self-constitution:

Following Tollefsen, if Christians are to stand for the dignity of the conscience, it means upholding the ability of the conscience to arrive at truths that are opposed to Christian orthodoxy. But Christians can take solace in the comfort that the rational operations of the mind, even when used against Christ, bespeak his wisdom and creativity, and in the culpability, that all consciences that have not been brought into conformity with him will still be held to account.

An emphasis on the image of God also emphasizes that the conscience is to be persuaded, never coerced, as an individual recognizes truth and falsehood.¹¹² The integrity of the conscience is grounded in the reality of duties that the conscience apprehends.

Consider the famous maxim of Cardinal John Henry Newman:

Conscience has rights because it has duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Lawgiver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations. It becomes a license to take up any or no religion, to take up this or that and let it go again, to go to church, to go to chapel, to boast of being above all religions and to be an

Both the exercise of judgments of conscience, and the exercise of religion, thus emerge as potentially thoroughly intertwined within an agent's life, and throughout that agent's life, and indeed, the intertwining extends across the entirety of an agent's social life, as she sees her marriage, and family, her forms of voluntary association, and her political life as all governed by a religiously formed conscience, and as all integral aspects of her vocation, the life she is called to lead by God as her side of the divine human relationship.

For a similar argument, see Germain G. Grisez, "Natural Law, God, Religion, and Human Fulfillment," *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 46, no. 1 (2001): 3-36.

¹¹²Senator Ben Sasse, an evangelical and academic historian, offers a helpful statement on the connection on the relationships between "rights," the image of God, and non-coercion. Ben Sasse, "Senator Sasse on the Importance of Religious Freedom in Society," *Light Magazine*, Summer 2016, 41, writes,

I want a public square where people who are created in the image of God with dignity can affirm everyone else's right of free assembly and free speech and freedom of religion and freedom of the press. And then engage robustly—lovingly, but robustly—and vigorously in the market place of ideas to try to persuade other people.

Consider also the words of Shah et al., *Religious Freedom*, 28:

Human beings are noble agents—agents with high worth and dignity. An integral aspect of these characteristics is that all persons have the great privilege and responsibility of freely forming their own judgments of reason and conscience about—and freely establishing their own relationship with—transcendent reality. They have an intrinsic interest in forming their characters and lives—constituting themselves—into integrated wholes that fully reflect the demands and implications of transcendent truth as they grasp it. Anything less than full religious freedom fails to respect the dignity of persons as free truth-seekers, duty-bound to respond to the truth (and only the truth) about the transcendent in accordance with their own judgments of conscience.

impartial critic of each of them. Conscience is a stern monitor, but in this century it has been superseded by a counterfeit, which the eighteen centuries prior to it never heard of, and could not have mistaken for it, if they had. It is the right of self-will.¹¹³

According to Newman, the role of the conscience is to discern moral duty, and to exercise one's duty based on what the conscience discerns. Notice that Newman is also critiquing general appeals of "conscience" that are made in order to license immorality or self-autonomy. In Newman's thinking, the conscience acts to discern truth, not simply respond to whatever impulse or idea is populated by the mind. Heimbach refers to this as the "ordered liberty" component of religious liberty. This is a view of freedom that sees religious liberty guided by moral restraint out of obligation to a higher law than human law. This is a view of "freedom *for* as opposed to freedom *from*."¹¹⁴ This paradigm rescues religious liberty from concerns of relativism or evasion from legal boundaries. In this view, ordered liberty "presumes that real moral authority is objective, enduring, and universal, and is certainly not anything controlled or made up by those living by it."¹¹⁵

While this was discussed more fully in chapter 2, questions about the nature of conscience raise questions concerning the state's competency over the conscience. Albornoz argues, rightly that humanity is solely responsible to God for claims made by the conscience, and that the state must respect this ultimate responsibility because the state is "subordinated" to God. From this perspective, the freedom of the conscience implies limited political authority stemming from the freedom that God gives to the individual as an element of his or her nature, not as a subsidy from the state.

¹¹³John Henry Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching Considered* (London: Longmans and Green, 1897), 250.

¹¹⁴Daniel R. Heimbach, "Understanding the Difference between Religious Liberty and Religious Autonomy," in *First Freedom: The Baptist Perspective on Religious Liberty*, ed. Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 133.

¹¹⁵Ibid. Heimbach helpfully contrasts this with an "Autonomous Liberty" paradigm that defines freedom as the absence of obligation.

Culpability and conversion. God created human persons with a conscience.

This conscience will be held accountable to God (Rom 2:12; Rom 3:20). As two evangelical authors note, “The guilt that your conscience makes you feel should lead you to turn from your sin to Jesus.”¹¹⁶ The conscience is therefore a vehicle of indictment, but only free consciences can be legitimately indicted. It is the conscience that bears witness to the self’s guilt that renders persons deserving of condemnation from God. According to Henry:

The Bible teaches that all human beings, irrespective of nationality or race or religion, have some intellectual and moral light and that conscience hails them anticipatively before God’s judgment throne. It condemns nonperformance of what humans know to be right as insistently as it deplores inexcusable ignorance of the right.¹¹⁷

In the interest of holding consciences truly accountable, consciences must be free. Thus, a doctrine of the image of God, one that takes seriously human beings’ status as morally free creatures, must hold the conscience to be free because it is the conscience that makes individuals indictable. Indeed, it is the “continuing answerability” of believer and unbeliever alike that weds our freedom to our responsibility before God’s judgment.¹¹⁸ As Sherif Girgis and Ryan T. Anderson argue, religious liberty implies that people are free to be “deluded about matters of cosmic importance around which they have ordered their lives—even *damnable wrong*.”¹¹⁹ The freedom that God endows humanity with is a freedom that will be held responsible for how it was used.¹²⁰ Carl Henry elsewhere argues that it is the answerability of the conscience to God that makes a person “ultimately

¹¹⁶Naselli and Crowley, *Conscience*, 25.

¹¹⁷Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 150.

¹¹⁸Wilder, “Eleutheria in the New Testament and Religious Liberty,” 413.

¹¹⁹John Corvino, Ryan T. Anderson, and Sherif Girgis, *Debating Religious Liberty and Discrimination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 170.

¹²⁰Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty*, 73.

responsible not to his fellow men but to God for the decisions he makes and the options he pursues.”¹²¹

The image of God in every person means that free consciences are the requirement for genuine conversion. Coercion in defense of religious allegiance is a “contradiction” of “God’s ways with men as well as a lack of trust in the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹²² Individuals must be brought to conviction and repentance through the operations of the heart and mind, which means that freedom, therefore, is not just an abstract political doctrine, but the essence that makes voluntary faith possible. Individuals must be free to be wrong, because it is out of recognition that one is wrong that individuals repent and truly turn toward the gospel.

It is at the exact point of our understanding the use of the conscience to indict individuals that the eschatological dimension of the conscience comes into focus. According to Naselli and Crowley, “Unlike our consciences, though, Jesus’s conscience perfectly matches God’s will, and he has never sinned against it.”¹²³ The moral perfection of Jesus’s conscience is the backdrop of judgment to the fallen consciences of humanity.

The Image of God as the Foundation for a Human Right to Religious Liberty

The foundation and security of human rights remains one of the most elusive challenges to modern thinking. It is the argument of this section that shorn of theistic foundations, an inviolable doctrine of human rights is impossible to attain, since it collapses inevitably to speculation on the part of society and majorities. Carl F. H. Henry

¹²¹Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 72. Henry goes on to state, “The apostles say nothing about an absolute or wholly unqualified right to repudiate God. What they recognize is that man chooses whom he will serve and bears the consequences of such decision not as determined by state or society but by the final judgment of God.”

¹²²Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 151.

¹²³Naselli and Crowley, *Conscience*, 22.

argues that “objectively grounded human rights are logically defensible on this foundation of the supernatural creation of man with universal dignity.”¹²⁴ It is the image of God where human rights derive, and where religious liberty’s inviolability is anchored as an entailment of human rights.

The Image of God and Human Rights

No doctrine has better aided a foundation for human rights than the doctrine of the image of God.¹²⁵ When looking at the implications of the image of God downstream for endeavors such as human rights, politics, and social ethics, it has been observed that “it is doubtful if there is any one more concept more basic for democracy and Western civilization in general.”¹²⁶ Its significance to human rights stems from the implication that humanity has profound dignity and worth because of its elevated creational status.

Theologians and ethicists from across the theological spectrum agree that humanity as a creation of God has profound implications for a doctrine of human rights. In the view of Henry Stob, “Human rights are rooted in the divine act of creation. The Christian says that the basic rights of man are not conferred upon him by an impersonal

¹²⁴Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 66. He also argues, “The evangelical view is that human rights are grounded in the revealed will of God, that religious liberty and political liberty are alike based on the Bible. The attempt to ground human rights other than theologically cannot effectively sustain itself.” Ibid., 67.

¹²⁵This statement begs qualification since it would be irresponsible to put “human rights” solely causative as the result of Christian ethical and theological reflection. Villa-Vicencio, “Christianity and Human Rights,” 579, observes, “The history of the emergence of human rights within the Western Christian tradition recognizes that religions develop in interaction with other social and cultural forces in society.” For more on the development of human rights in the context of Christian ethical and theological thinking, see Harold J. Berman, *Faith and Order: The Reconciliation of Law and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution II: The Impact of the Protestant Reformations on the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006); Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law, 1150-1625*, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion, no. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

¹²⁶T. B. Maston, *The Bible and Race*, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Broadman, 1959), 13.

nature, nor by society, but by God.”¹²⁷ Sidney Greidanus helpfully observes that human rights originate from the creational status of humanity: “Human rights, we could say, are kingdom rights which the King gives to the citizens of his kingdom. In the beginning the Creator put his law to the creation and, notwithstanding sin, God still maintains these norms for creation.”¹²⁸ Henry likewise states that “inalienable rights are creational rights governing the community and the individual, rights implicit in the social commandments of the Decalogue.”¹²⁹ Phillip Wogaman writes that it is the “dignity of man as God’s creature” that supplies humanity with rights, and particularly religious liberty.¹³⁰

If humanity is a creation of God and not simply an autonomous being born of evolutionary materialism, then the relationship of humanity to its transcendent Creator and the rights or duties it bears is key to unlocking the fullest understanding of humanity’s identity, nature, and purpose. Apart from theistic foundation, there is no hope for an understanding of human rights that make them inalienable and thus inviolable.¹³¹ Carl Henry argues that a failure to anchor rights to metaphysical foundations will mean that “secular notions of jurisprudence collapse routinely into revered human convention.”¹³² However, without a metaphysical foundation, discerning the purpose or telos of rights becomes a vain pursuit. According to Kevin Lee, “Endless seeking of

¹²⁷Henry Stob, *Ethical Reflections: Essays on Moral Themes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 131.

¹²⁸Greidanus, “Human Rights in Biblical Perspective,” 6.

¹²⁹Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 158.

¹³⁰Wogaman, *Protestant Faith and Religious Liberty*, 33.

¹³¹For more on the relationship between the image of God and human rights, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 342-61; Robert P. Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 107-64.

¹³²Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 145.

rights becomes banal without some understanding of what rights are for.”¹³³ The purpose of rights are found in returning to the doctrine of the image of God at creation.

A divine foundation for human rights provides a better, fixed, and objective account for protecting those rights than the shifting sands of human opinion, political philosophy, or social science. As evangelical theologian R. Albert Mohler writes,

Human rights and human dignity are temporary abstractions if they are severed from their reality as gifts of the creator. The eclipse of Christian truth will lead inevitably to a tragic loss of human dignity. If we lose religious liberty, all other liberties will be lost, one by one.¹³⁴

Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck grounds “rights” in the covenants that God has made both with Noah and Adam wherein he “grants to his creatures an array of rights and binds himself by an oath to maintain these rights.”¹³⁵

In the end, if human rights do not originate from divine sanction, they become subject to popular majorities. On the importance of rights enduring against the vicissitudes of human opinion, Inazu argues that “rights” language is an “important part of the check against majoritarian power and the ability of individuals to establish meaning apart from government orthodoxy.”¹³⁶ History is littered with the collateral damage done to human dignity when human rights, dignity, and worth are held without divine warrant.¹³⁷ Not only are those violating human rights doing damage to human

¹³³Kevin P. Lee, “Deeper Longings: The Relevance of Christian Theology for Contemporary Rights Theories,” *Ave Maria Law Review* 3, no. 1 (2005), 294.

¹³⁴R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *The Gathering Storm: Religious Liberty and the Right to Be Christian* (Louisville: SBTs Press, 2017), 43.

¹³⁵Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2: 227.

¹³⁶John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 26.

¹³⁷This is an important point worth stressing. Human convention is not a firm foundation to secure the rights of man. Consider the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which attempts to string together a universal understanding of rights (among them, religious freedom). Henry observes that the statement “wholly ignores the subject of the ultimate source and sanction of rights and does not even obligate states to enact the stipulated rights.” Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 149. All that “rights”

dignity, they are transgressing the laws of God. A doctrine of human rights is best served by theistic formulation because with it comes divine accountability.

Is Religious Liberty a Human “Right?”

Carl F. H. Henry has argued that religious liberty is “not only a fundamental human right, but it shelters also the whole broad spectrum of human rights.”¹³⁸ This he declares because he argues that freedom is grounded, ultimately, in God.¹³⁹ A 2004 document by the National Association of Evangelicals declared:

Because God created human beings in his image, we are endowed with rights and responsibilities. In order to carry out these responsibilities, human beings need the freedom to form associations, formulate and express beliefs, and act on conscientiously held commitments.¹⁴⁰

The NAE document is helpful because it establishes the rights of conscience by grounding such rights in the image of God. The statement also, however, declares that the image of God carries both responsibility and freedom to exercise conscience. But how ought religious liberty be understood as a human right that follows from humanity being made in God’s image? First, it is important to consider that it was the Christian religion that one looks to in history as first positing any notion of religious freedom. In the words of the early Church Father Tertullian:

It is a human right (*humani iuris*) and inborn capacity (*naturlis potestatis*) that one should worship whatever he intends; the religious practice of one neither harms nor

reduces down to is a mutually beneficial doctrine of reciprocity: You protect my rights and I will protect your rights. This leaves important questions about the ultimate protection and divine accountability that follows from a rights doctrine. Henry, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?*, 5, argues, “All members of the human community are simultaneously carriers of a created dignity and of divinely stipulated responsibilities and rights.”

¹³⁸Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 72. For a chapter-length treatment on the connection between human rights and religious liberty, see Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty*, 33-41.

¹³⁹Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 73.

¹⁴⁰National Association of Evangelicals, “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility,” 2004, accessed August 27, 2017, <http://nae.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/For-the-Health-of-the-Nation.pdf>.

helps another. It is no part of religion to coerce religious practice, for it is by free choice and not coercion that we should be led to religion.¹⁴¹

In his *Apology*, Tertullian first used the phrase “religious freedom” (*libertatem religionis*) ever seen on the world’s stage.¹⁴² That Tertullian framed his remarks on religious liberty in the context of “rights” (*ius*) language is not insignificant.¹⁴³ Timothy Shah observes that Tertullian’s framing is doubly important because it presents religious freedom not as a “tactical plea for forbearance” but rather as a “principled doctrine” of *libertatem religionis*, a phrase invented by Tertullian, which implied protection and application to all religions, not just Christians.¹⁴⁴ From the earliest origins of Christianity, this new, marginalized sect of Jewish and Greek Christians posited a universalized understanding of religious freedom as an inherent grant of God to humanity. Church historian Robert Wilken argues that Tertullian’s language signifies the power of individual choice to arrive at a person’s understanding of religious truth and obligation, and importantly, “this ‘right’ precedes and is independent of any action by the ruling authorities; it is not a benefaction of the state.”¹⁴⁵ Stunningly, Tertullian is not seen advancing a mere “religious toleration” argument for religious liberty because the intrinsic nature of humanity is outside the jurisdiction of the state.¹⁴⁶

Critically, however, Tertullian and later, Lactantius, argued for religious liberty on the grounds of humanity’s anthropological status as made in the image of God. The

¹⁴¹Tertullian, “To Scapula,” in *Tertullian Apologetical Works and Minucius Felix Octavius*, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann, Emily Joseph Daly, and Edwin Quain (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959), 10:152.

¹⁴²Tertullian, “Apology,” in *Tertullian Apologetical Works and Minucius Felix Octavius*, 10:76.

¹⁴³On the social context of “Ius” in Roman Law, see Charles Donahue, “Ius in Roman Law,” in *Christianity and Human Rights*, 64-80.

¹⁴⁴Timothy Samuel Shah, “The Roots of Religious Freedom in Early Christian Thought,” in *Christianity and Freedom*, 1:54.

¹⁴⁵Wilken, “The Christian Roots of Religious Freedom,” 65.

¹⁴⁶*Ibid.*

“natural capacity” that Tertullian speaks is derivative of the “dignity and worth” of every human being. Tertullian cites Genesis 1:26-27 as evidence that humanity possesses both reason and is “animated with divine life.”¹⁴⁷ “Man was created by God as free,” argues Tertullian, “with power to choose and power to act . . . there is no clearer indication in him of God’s image and similitude than this.”¹⁴⁸

An important caveat is necessary at this point. For fear of placing modern “rights” categories onto the biblical text, it is important to establish “rights” in a way that does not damage the biblical text by placing classically liberal or Enlightenment categories on it. Rights in biblical language come in the form of duty. A person’s duty toward their creator, themselves, and their relationships are grounded in divinely-mandated obligation. If an obligation is placed on humanity, it can be deduced that the ability to execute one’s duty becomes sacrosanct, which is synonymous with a right. Henry also observes this point as well, noting that “the Bible does not teach that human beings simply on the basis of existence have inherent or *a priori* rights.” Instead, according to Henry, “The Bible has a doctrine of divinely imposed duties; what moderns call human rights are the contingent flipside of those duties.”¹⁴⁹

In contemporary settings, David VanDrunen’s argument (cited heavily in chap. 2) provides, once again, a helpful foundation for understanding how religious liberty is a human right, particularly through a creational imago dei framework, and not simply through the prism of classical liberalism. According to VanDrunen, whose argument is rooted in the Genesis account of creation and re-creation in Genesis 9, human beings

¹⁴⁷Wilken, “The Christian Roots of Religious Freedom,” 65. Wilken continues, “Christian thinking on the dignity of the human person and freedom of the will, grounded in the biblical doctrine of the image of God, helped to prepare the way for the later doctrine of natural rights and religious freedom.”

¹⁴⁸Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, trans. Earnes Evans (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 1:100-01.

¹⁴⁹Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 148. Henry also states, “Yahweh formulates human duties as an obligation to God, not as conferring tangible rights or benefits upon humanity *per se*.”

have no ultimate religious freedom before God, but they do before each other and the institutions of society.¹⁵⁰ This means, practically, that a right to religious freedom issues from the reality of persons bearing the image of God, but bearing that image in a fallen capacity. God does not hold his image bearers guiltless for exercising their reason imperfectly, but the gifts of their creative endowment (reason, moral agency, etc.) limit the ability for society to exclude, repress, intervene, or mediate religious belief on behalf of another image bearer or to coerce an image bearer into belief where no such conviction arises. In the words of VanDrunen,

As part of the natural order sustained in the covenant with Noah, God has granted to each human being in the present age the common blessings of participating in the life of human society, without religious qualification, and thus each person may claim, against any fellow human beings who would seek to add such a qualification, the unhindered right to this participation.¹⁵¹

This right, VanDrunen believes, is “penultimate” and “granted by God.”¹⁵² So a “right” to religious liberty is grounded in the fact that humanity bears God’s image, is inherently religious because of this image, and cannot be restricted from acting on religious belief by human institutions, despite whatever inaccuracies subsist in the

¹⁵⁰David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 506.

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*, 509. VanDrunen writes on p. 508, The implication for the question of religious freedom is simple, but deeply significant. The simple implication is this: If God has called the entire human race (regardless of religious identification) to participate in the cultural life of society while he preserves this present world, then no human being has the authority to exclude other human beings from full participation because of their religious profession or practice. The covenant with Noah is a common grace *blessing of God* (Gen 9:1). Therefore, the minimalist natural law ethic concerning procreation, eating, and justice (9:1-7) does not merely involve obligations but also a privilege that God grants to all people to be active members of civil society—and this despite the ongoing blight of human sin (8:21) and the specter of a final judgment in the distant future. Since God blesses people with these privileges without respect to religious profession, if a human being strips another human being of these privileges because of religious profession, he defies the post-fall natural order established by God. Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, paragraph 9, makes a similar line of argument, stating, “It appears not that God has ever given any such authority to one man over another, as to compel anyone to his religion.”

¹⁵²VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, 508.

conclusions that are reached. Waldron also observes that an emphasis on human rights implies a right to religious freedom:

Our lives need to be ruled in respect of God and worship; our natural impulse to neglect God our Creator in favor of mundane concerns needs to be mastered and suppressed. But *imago Dei* implies that we are actually the sort of beings that can master themselves in this way. We can be trusted in these matters. We are capable of the appropriate kind of self-regarding dominion in respect of these momentous matters. We do not need rule imposed from the outside.¹⁵³

The right to religious freedom is the result of a doctrine that takes seriously the identity of humanity as a creature whose responsibilities to God imply a bedrock foundation, which inviolably secures the ability for these responsibilities to be fulfilled. Religious liberty is thus a “moral absolute,” an ethically consequential term communicating the gravity of its importance.¹⁵⁴ Or in the words of Albornoz, “religious freedom, although a human right, is nevertheless on a higher plane than other human rights, as it is based directly upon the absolute relation of man to God.”¹⁵⁵ This is why, according to Charles Villa-Vicencio, religious liberty became the right that grounded all other rights. The idea of humanity's individual responsibility before God proffered immense dignity, intelligibility, and significance to the development of human rights doctrine.¹⁵⁶

Instructively, commenting on how religious liberty is the antecedent to all other rights and liberties, Albornoz draws a helpful connection between religious liberty, human rights, and Christology:

The reason given for these assertions is that ‘the fundamental rights of the human person cannot endure except when they are acknowledged as derived from man’s relation to God in Christ. Or, in other terms, that only the recognition that man has

¹⁵³Waldron, “The Image of God,” 229. He continues, “But we are the sort of beings who can exercise rights responsibly, and who can discern the moral order in whose context particular exercises of rights count as responsible.”

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁵⁵Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty*, 80.

¹⁵⁶Villa-Vicencio, “Christianity and Human Rights,” 587.

ends and loyalties beyond the state [we could say beyond the society in general] will ensure true justice to the human person.¹⁵⁷

Equality and inviolability. The image of God renders all persons equal before one another and before God. According to Duke, “All people bear the same image of the divine, to the same degree; therefore, all have equal status before God.”¹⁵⁸ Greidanus argues that the image of God also implies all persons possessing equal worth.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, the image of God possesses an “equalizing tendency” such that individuals do not possess greater ontological image bearing status over other image bearers.¹⁶⁰ Albornoz argues that the Christian concept of dignity, built on the assumptions underlying the idea of personhood, demands both liberty and equality.¹⁶¹

One of, or if not the most attractive feature of the image of God as the anthropological foundation for religious liberty is its implication for securing religious liberty as an inviolable right. The matter of inviolability is perhaps the greatest attribute that the image of God can bring to religious liberty. By “inviolable,” it is the prospect for treating religious liberty as “something about our sheer humanity that commands respect and is to be treated as inviolable, irrespective of or prior to any positive law or social convention.”¹⁶² To wit, if religious liberty is a right conferred upon humanity by virtue of its creational status, this reality makes religious liberty an inalienable, unalterable, and owed right due to humanity. The image of God gives “theological substance” to a principle that modern rights are aimlessly questing after with theistic or confessional elements out

¹⁵⁷Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty*, 40.

¹⁵⁸Duke, “The Christian Doctrine of Religious Liberty,” 93.

¹⁵⁹Greidanus, “Human Rights in Biblical Perspective,” 15.

¹⁶⁰Waldron, “The Image of God,” 225.

¹⁶¹Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty*, 96.

¹⁶²Waldron, “The Image of God,” 216.

of the picture.¹⁶³ Inviolability denotes a sacredness about humankind grounded in the being of God that demands recognition and respect.¹⁶⁴ The notion of “rights” denotes an “objective moral authority to which individuals could appeal.”¹⁶⁵ Likewise, Franck observes that image of God produces an “ineradicable dignity” as free persons.¹⁶⁶

Wood argues that “religious liberty is biblically rooted in man’s nature and in his inalienable right to respond freely to God’s revelation.”¹⁶⁷ If religious liberty is indeed inviolable, it means that religious liberty is something innate to personal integrity, and cannot be understood as issuing from government itself. Rather, religious liberty is “rooted in the inviolable sacredness of the human conscience. Man has juridical rights because he has certain inalienable moral rights as a person.”¹⁶⁸ It is said to be a “right of the individual” and not a “gift” of the state, because for the Christian, “the divinely ordered nature of man, as revealed in the Scriptures, constitutes the basis for all human rights and civil liberties.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶³Waldron, “The Image of God,” 216.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 222. Waldron offers additional insight on how the image of God supplies human rights language with the concept of “dignity” on p. 226:

Imago Dei presents the respect that humans as such are entitled to as something grounded, not what we happen to care about or in what we happen to have committed ourselves to, but in facts about what humans are actually like, or, more accurately, what they have been made by the Creator to be like—like unto Himself and by virtue of that likeness sacred and inviolable. We are not just clever animals, and the evil-doers among us are not just good animals gone bad: our dignity is associated with an especially high rank in creation accorded to us by our creator and reflecting our likeness to the creator. Our status even as wrong-doers is to be understood in relation to this.

¹⁶⁵Villa-Vicencio, “Christianity and Human Rights,” 587.

¹⁶⁶Franck, “Two Tales,” 36.

¹⁶⁷Wood, “A Biblical View of Religious Liberty,” 35.

¹⁶⁸Ibid.

¹⁶⁹Ibid.

Religious Liberty and the Commonality of Human Experience

Religious liberty can be a difficult concept to translate in a secular era. Secular individuals view it as a religious idea while religious individuals are prone to view it as a political idea. In a time of great misunderstanding, if attempts were made to distill religious liberty down to its most basic meaning in a form that everyone, religious and non-religious, would understand, how would that be accomplished?

Everyone, whether secular or religious, has categories for each of these words explained below by virtue of their creational status as image bearers of God. Everyone worships something (adoration); everyone wants to live truthfully (authentically); and everyone has an ultimate standard for what they value (authority). These concepts are the building blocks of religious liberty. Everyone, whether secular or religious, relies—unconsciously or consciously—on these three terms to help bring meaning to their own lives. Each word is crucial to understanding why religious liberty is vital to the human experience as rational, truth-seeking persons made in the image of God.

Adoration: Who or What Is Worshiped?

Adoration means to adore, to worship or venerate, or to give highest devotion, praise, and love to someone or something. Everyone adores. Whether it is a favorite sports team, a hobby like traveling, or God, everyone has something at their core that drives them and contends for their attention and affections. Whatever the object of adoration, its purpose is to help anchor their lives and give it meaning.

Who or what is worshiped is the source of ultimate meaning. It is possible to rephrase the question of “What is worshiped?” to “Where is ultimate meaning found?” Is ultimate meaning found in the State? Religion? Entertainment? Science?

An important question follows: What right, if any, does someone or something (such as the state) have to prevent someone from engaging in adoration or worship? As this dissertation has argued thus far, very little, in fact. If someone’s liberties to find

meaning in life should not be restricted, neither should the liberties that ground the ability for someone to find that same meaning in their understanding of God.

Unless what guides someone's deepest convictions cause genuine harm to society, society should let people be as free as possible to pursue ultimate meaning and truth. Christians confess that the triune God is the Lord of the universe and that the Godhead is to be worshipped (Ps 29:2; Ps 33:8; Ps 95:6). For Christians, worship is not just a rote practice. Worship is the source of existence, because Christians believe they are made to worship their Creator.

Authenticity: What Is True Living?

Imagine, for one moment, that a state passes a law that requires someone to believe something that goes against what their conscience teaches them or requires them to act in a way that violates their ethics. Not only would the state be overreaching, but a person will experience deep inner conflict. Being coerced into acting on or believing in what someone believes is wrong creates inward fracture and disturbance that does not promote human flourishing. It is akin, for example, to making the oppressed believe that their oppressors are virtuous. That would be inhumane.

Living authentically requires the free exercise of God-given faculties for that purpose. The artist who creates beautiful masterpieces is not simply drawing or painting, but creating an image that reflects the creativity and beauty inside them or that is observed externally. Whether moral expression, aesthetic expression, or creative expression, a presumption toward liberty assures human flourishing should be sought after and unhindered.

The question is: Will a person be able to engage in the activity that gives them the greatest meaning? Perhaps someone thinks that the thrill-seeking of mountain climbing is what makes them happiest. A person who finds delight and joy in mountain climbing will want as few obstacles as possible in their way for them to get to engage in the act that fulfills them. Or, if an individual's religion teaches them, for example, that

orphaned children are to be cared for, society should not take action that makes living out the obligations of deepest convictions more difficult. Religious liberty is about authenticity because having the opportunity to act on what drives someone's motivations ensures that someone's deepest convictions are not restricted and that a person is living truthfully to one's conscience.

In most instances concerning religion, it is through adoration or worship that people obtain a code of ethics and morality necessary for living. Everyone has a code of ethics and morality regardless of whether they consider themselves religious or not. In fact, religious liberty protects the atheist as much as the religious. Each person has deeply held convictions and moral codes which we prioritize and use to dictate all of their actions, words, and decisions. Religious liberty thus protects all persons.

The skeptical reader might respond, "So, are you saying that someone has the right to be wrong in what they value as authentic conviction?" Yes, and no. Religious liberty, ultimately, is not a license to do anything that seems right as though relativism is acceptable; it is ultimately about exercising a God-given conscience toward God-honoring ends. Again, As John Henry Newman once wrote referenced above, "Conscience has rights because it has duties." Authentic living is not coterminous with unbound autonomy. Chris Tollefsen provides helpful pushback to this notion that religious liberty, conscience, and freedom of conscience result in radical relativism:

Conscience is a judgment of reason, and an upright will acts in accordance with reason. But reason is oriented towards the truth. So, while any attempt at self-constitution is successful just insofar as it constitutes a person in this or that way, the perfection of self-constitution is self-actualization in accordance with the truth about human well-being.¹⁷⁰

For the conscience to apprehend a duty, and to respond to it appropriately, results in authentic living. Furthermore, no one is making the claim that the right to authentic living is an absolute right at all costs. Where governing bodies reach legitimate

¹⁷⁰Tollefsen, "Conscience, Religion and the State," 96.

conclusions that someone's expression of authentic living is causing harm to himself or herself or to society, the government has the right to intervene.

Authority: Who Has Ultimate Judgment?

Even non-religious people believe someone, something, or some ideology has ultimate say over life's meaning. The nihilist responds that the highest authority is simply non-existence. The atheist responds that rationality is the highest authority. The hedonist pleads for pleasure's highest authority. The Darwinist says that nature's systems and processes are the highest authority. A North Korean citizen believes that its country's leader is the highest authority.

Not all claims of authority are equal. The fact that Western civilization is in the throes of a crisis of authority indicates that people have very different ideas on what is authoritative. But still, everyone has an authority. And because society is imperfect, an era where competing claims of authority challenge one another is normal and expected. The question that is hard to answer in a liberal democratic context is whether someone's view of authority is truly ultimate. Why? Because the authority to make decisions about right and wrong is debatable as people seek to discern for themselves what is true.

What is known, however is that when government props up any one ideology or any one religion as the official position against all others, freedom is squelched, human happiness deteriorates, and societies live in deep, irresolvable conflict. This is why religious liberty is about a free-market of ideas that allow competing interpretations of authority to freely compete for people's acceptance. Religious liberty allows the various authorities to test their credibility and legitimacy against one another.

The founders of America understood that God's authority was superior over government's authority, and that government should not try to play the role of God, or obstruct humanity's response to God. Consider these words from James Madison:

It is the duty of every man to render to the Creator such homage and such only as he believes to be acceptable to him. This duty is precedent, both in order of time and in degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society. Before any man can be

considered as a member of Civil Society, he must be considered as a subject of the Governour of the Universe: And if a member of Civil Society, who enters into any subordinate Association, must always do it with a reservation of his duty to the General Authority; much more must every man who becomes a member of any particular Civil Society, do it with a saving of his allegiance to the Universal Sovereign.¹⁷¹

Madison's comments are helpful because he reminds the reader that before he or she is a citizen of the state, the first claim on that person is God and that person's understanding of who God is.

From a Christian perspective, ultimate authority is found in God. The state is not ultimate. No ideology is ultimate. Jesus Christ is ultimate. From a Christian perspective, any secondary authority (like the state) that tries to be a primary authority (like God) is mistaken.

The explanation offered here does not settle all ongoing disputes on religious liberty. It helps expose why society, in fact, is so fraught with conflict. Why? Because everyone has their own version of orthodoxy that can easily conflict with, undermine, or parallel another person's orthodoxy. In a pluralistic society, striving after common denominators that allow everyone to experience as much freedom as possible is the desired end.

Furthermore, persons are not free to do whatever he or she pleases because of adoration, authenticity, and authority. Rather, every person operates according to these concepts knowingly or unknowingly, and establishing what they are and why they matter helps individuals sympathize with others who approach and understand these concepts differently.

The argument of the above section can be summarized citing Deuteronomy 10:12-13:

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God

¹⁷¹James Madison, "A Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessment (1785)," in *The Sacred Rights of Conscience: Selected Readings on Religious Liberty and Church-State Relations in the American Founding*, ed. Daniel Dreisbach and Mark David Hall (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), 309.

with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good? (Deut 10:12-13)

In this verse, it is God who possesses authority over creation requiring something of it because of his ultimate power to command; God requires adoration to love and serve him, and God desires this in authentic form with an authentic entire self.

The image of God subsists in all persons despite the conclusions they reach about the existence of God and how and whether this God wants worship. But the model advocated above signals the ineradicability of the image of God in all humanity in its religious and ethical dimensions: All persons generate convictions. As Niebuhr rightly argues, “To deny the reality of a supernatural being called God is one thing; to live without confidence in some center of value and without loyalty to a cause is another.”¹⁷²

Humans desire to worship God. Humans desire to bring their worship into every corner of their lives in whatever form that takes. And humans give to God or whatever functions as a “god” the highest place of authority. These basic truths form the backbone of why religious liberty is integral not only to a Christian understanding of the human person, but of the human person who shares a common constitution, a likeness made in God’s own image.

Conclusion

Matthew 22:15-22 is one of the most looked-to passages to support a doctrine of religious liberty. This disputation between Jesus and the Pharisees is commonly marshaled to defend the legitimacy of the state over certain affairs, which is true, insofar as the issue of taxation is concerned. But the disputation is a revealing episode of theological score-settling, one relevant to the image of God and religious liberty.

Because the coin would have borne Caesar’s image (Matt 20:20-21), would Jesus be willing to affirm the use of a coin for taxation that bore Caesar’s image on it, a

¹⁷²H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (San Francisco: Harper, 1960), 25.

Caesar that claimed divine status for himself and to whom Jews took offense? If he affirms, then Jesus is seen as betraying God; but if he denies, he'll be seen as a subversive revolutionary by the Romans. Jesus, however, affirms both—that Jews can pay taxes while “honoring the superiority of God’s sovereignty.”¹⁷³ Rebecca Mathis argues that this episode does not provide enough evidence for church-state separation, but rather a “tension” that God’s people find themselves living in—an earthly kingdom and God’s kingdom. As Mathis observes, “Jesus neither defines the church and state as one and the same nor portrays them as isolated institutions having no effect on one another.”¹⁷⁴ Rather, Jesus is making a deeper inquiry: What belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God? Sometimes the answers are not in tension; other times they are. However, Jesus urges his followers to measure the limited claims of the state against the total claims of God. Jesus’s emphasis on the coin bears important significance: “The denarius, bearing the likeness of God, belongs to God; therefore humanity, bearing the likeness of God, belongs to God.”¹⁷⁵ The background of Genesis sheds light on the fullness of this passage. By Jesus signaling that humanity owes its ultimate allegiance to God because he is their creator, Jesus is grounding this allegiance in their being made in the image and likeness of God. The implication that each person bears the image of God denotes persons understanding their entire selves—their rationality, their freedom, their moral agency—as ultimately responsible to God.

It has been the argument of this chapter that biblical anthropology—the idea that humanity bears special significance because it has been made in the image of God—furnishes an anthropological framework for religious liberty. And secondarily, that religious liberty is unsecured apart from humanity’s ontological createdness. Religious

¹⁷³Rebecca C Mathis, “The Roots of Religious Liberty in Scripture,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 55, no. 4 (2012): 397.

¹⁷⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 398.

liberty is grounded in the reality that humans are neither phantoms nor impersonal cogs existing in a deterministic vacuum, but reasoning persons with cognitive intellects, wills, emotions, and desires. Religious liberty is not simply a question concerning the ordering of political communities. It is a pre-political reality that sorts out how freedom, reason, and moral duty coordinate toward human flourishing and divine accountability.

More fundamentally, religious liberty is about understanding the essential nature of the individual as a creative being made in the image of God. Religious freedom means responding freely to the God who made humanity in his image and who is redeeming humanity through Jesus Christ, the image of God. All humans are made by their creator to worship him. All humans are made to find their satisfaction in him. All humans are made to be reconciled to God. Everyone, however, must reach this destiny of their own accord held to account with the freedom they possess as image bearers. Persons made in the image of God will reach wrong conclusions, even damnable conclusions. But those conclusions are sincere conclusions that each person makes based on their own understanding of duty, conscience, and divine revelation. This means that all people are owed the respect and dignity to reach the proper conclusion for themselves.

CHAPTER 4

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND THE MISSION OF GOD: A SOTERIOLOGICAL ACCOUNT

Helping ignite a contemporary missions emphasis in Reformed evangelical circles, pastor John Piper wrote in a now famous declaration, “Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship does not. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man.”¹ Lest there be confusion over the importance ascribed to religious liberty advanced in this chapter, placing religious liberty in proper context helps frame the argument of this chapter: Religious liberty is not the ultimate good for the church of Jesus Christ. Worship of the Lord Jesus Christ over his kingdom is. But religious liberty, as an instrumentally necessary social ethic, is vital because worship is more vital. Worship is ultimate, not religious liberty, because God is ultimate, not humanity. Religious liberty, understood as the ability to freely advance the gospel and to allow the gospel’s ethical implications to flourish in and among persons in the institutions they create, is missional to the extent that religious liberty helps “bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations” (Rom 1:5).

The purpose for any doctrine of religious liberty, from the vantage point of Christian social ethics, is the advancement of God’s kingdom. Religious liberty exists, is intelligible, and ultimately purposeful on the basis that it functions as a distinctly Christian social ethic designed to facilitate uncoerced and unobstructed access to humankind’s greatest need—salvation in Jesus Christ. Apart from the genuine freedom

¹John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 15.

that religious liberty offers those confronted with the claims of the gospel, salvation is not authentic. As this chapter will argue, the internal logic of the gospel itself, as a freely shared and freely assented-to narrative recognizes, and even demands something conceptually akin to religious liberty, since only authentic faith freely grasped and freely acted upon can be considered genuine faith.

Thus, the eschatological reign of God, the nature of humanity as created in the image of God, and the nature of faith itself understands religious liberty as an essential component to the soteriological scheme in the Bible. Therefore, religious liberty is integral to the advancement of the gospel, since it is a missiological ethic used for the sake of the church's mission in society. As a social teaching, religious liberty is an instrumental and interim ethic according to Christian social ethics. It exists within a penultimately secular age to allow fallen consciences to respond, genuinely, to the truth that "there is no other name by which man can be saved than Jesus Christ" (Acts 4:12). Christianity does not countenance liberty for liberty's own sake, but the liberty to exercise one's faculties toward their properly ordered end as image bearers of God whose chief purpose is conformity to Christ (Rom 8:29).

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that the mission of God and religious liberty intersect in this age because religious liberty is an interim ethic meant to (1) advance God's kingdom on earth, (2) manifest the values and mission of the kingdom in the lives of individual Christians, and (3) facilitate the kingdom's salvific and moral witness through the gathered church operating in society. Religious liberty's apologetic force as a distinctly Christian social and missiological ethic is grounded in its soteriological purpose. As religious liberty is utilized for evangelization, it acts as a pathway for the gospel's insurgency. Restated, mission gives religious liberty apologetical force in giving social space for gospel proclamation.

This chapter has three main parts to its organization. First, a brief overview of the mission of God in biblical theology will be given to frame the approach to religious

liberty and mission throughout the rest of the chapter. In the second section, an explanation will be given on the overall economy of religious liberty within the horizon of mission, taking into consideration key themes from Scripture that gives legitimacy and backdrop to the overall argument of this chapter. Specifically, section two will investigate how religious liberty is central to Christian mission through its connection to soteriology. Emphasis will be put on viewing the connection between religious liberty and mission as the announcement of eschatological judgment and blessing. Additionally, aspects critical to evangelism will be shown to be tied to religious liberty. Lastly, a doctrine of general revelation and church mission will be tied to religious liberty that indicates how mission assumes a doctrine of general revelation and how the church's mission relies upon themes related to religious liberty.

Third, I will argue that religious liberty functions as a soteriological apologetic for public square witness addressing the question of how Christianity understands religious liberty in the context of its placement in society and why is religious liberty critically urgent to Christian mission in the public square within a penultimate age. This section will argue that a Christian social ethic of religious liberty sees religious pluralism and contestability as normative realities in a penultimate age that gives shape to how the church understands itself in this era.² A penultimate age, as mentioned in chapter two, sees contestability between religious and ideological systems as a normative component of the moral ecology within which the church's evangelistic witness operates. This section argues that the chief apologetic for religious liberty as a social ethic within the public square is its usefulness for advancing God's kingdom.

²More will be said about this in a later section, but it is important to address my use of *pluralism* from the outset. *Pluralism* does not refer to metaphysical pluralism, as though religious and moral claims issuing from different faiths and ideological systems are equally true or relativistic. Rather, the use of *pluralism* here is descriptive in that a penultimate age is marked by persons making a multitude of religious truth claims. *Pluralism* is not relativism; neither is it skepticism. For an excellent primer on the various types of pluralism confronting Christian social ethics, see Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

Since an evangelical social ethic of religious liberty is motivated out of a concern for the ability of free consciences to authentically respond to the gospel and to live out the gospel's ethical implications in society, section three argues that the implications of a Christian understanding of religious liberty and mission produces a moral and social ecology that promotes the possibility of Christian moral witness in society, civil tranquility, the common good, and religious liberty as a facet of God's provision of common grace in a fallen era.³

In conclusion, religious liberty is an instrumental and interim social ethic that posits as its highest goal the advancement of God's kingdom resulting in the salvation of persons. Additionally, ideas intrinsic to Christianity's understanding of religious liberty produce a moral and political ecology amenable to freedom and civil tranquility within the public square.

The Mission of God in Biblical Theology

This section briefly outlines a biblical theology of mission through its Christic, ecclesial, personal, and cultural-imperial dimensions, demonstrating that biblical theology portrays God as one whose mission is dynamic, reconciliatory, and participatory.⁴ The centerpiece of Christian reflection on mission is the biblical witness of God as actively intervening through human history to accomplish his divine plan.⁵ As Christopher Wright observes, mission is "a major key that unlocks the whole grand

³By *social tranquility*, I mean a state of affairs where a modicum of civil harmony is achieved.

⁴It is important to denote the difference in terminology between the *mission of God* and *missions*. *The mission of God* denotes God's self-revealing and saving efforts in the universe, while *missions* refers to the particular forms and practices that a commitment to God's mission manifests itself amongst his people in the world.

⁵For an evangelical account of how God's mission is tied together covenantally and narratively in the whole message of the Bible, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002); James Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

narrative of the canon of Scripture.”⁶ Moreover, unlocking the Bible’s understanding of mission is critical to determining the relationship between the church and the world, which is pivotal in locating the nature of the church’s mission and how religious liberty helps facilitate it. According to David Bosch, the biblical record reveals how “Christian mission gives expression to the dynamic relationship between God and the world, particularly as this was portrayed, first, in the story of the covenant people of Israel and then, supremely, in the birth, life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus.”⁷

At the same time, everything cannot be collapsed into mission. John Stott argues, rightly, that “mission” cannot be a stand-in to “cover everything God is doing in the world.”⁸ God’s providence and common grace, for example, are evidence of God maintaining the world, yet common grace and providence are not coterminous with mission. Mission, rather, concerns God’s redeeming actions and the vehicles through which he accomplishes it.⁹

Christic

The mission of God is of inestimable importance in determining the full scope of God’s plan for the cosmos.¹⁰ At the center of that mission is the unfolding of the

⁶Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 17.

⁷David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 9. For a detailed biblical examination of the shape of Christian mission from Genesis to the New Testament, see part 1 of Bosch’s volume.

⁸John Stott and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 19.

⁹Ibid. Stott goes on to state, “For God the Creator is constantly active in his world in providence, in common grace and judgment, quite apart from the purposes for which he has sent his Son, his Spirit and his church into the world.” Ibid., 30.

¹⁰For recent evangelical formulations on the nature of mission, see Bosch, *Transforming Mission*; Stott and Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*; Wright, *The Mission of God*; Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of*

Christic drama—a “mystery”—to “unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:9-10) through his kingship over a kingdom. From the outset, the mission of God is God’s plan to sum up all things in Jesus Christ, and for Jesus Christ to rule over the cosmos as the appointed “heir of all things” (Heb 1:2).¹¹ Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega (Rev 22:13); he is the telos of history. Even humanity’s redemption is patterned after God’s “firstborn,” so that our participation in God’s mission includes resembling the image of Jesus Christ more accurately (Rom 8:29). The drama of Scripture, from creation proceeding through all subsequent covenants, is guided by God’s intention to magnify the Lord Jesus through his ascension to the throne as King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev 19:16).

In this way, the Christic element of mission is cosmic; it encompasses all of the created order. Mission is understood as God’s redeeming all that he has created through an act of Christic rescue and restoration. God’s mission in Christ is thus as wide as the cosmos he created which he promises to redeem in perfection at the appointed time.

Ecclesial

God’s mission established a church, and the church is the exclusive vehicle appointed to announce the good news of the gospel. Though an evangelical Protestant would disagree with the definition of “church” issuing from the Roman Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council is right to state that “the church on earth is by its very nature missionary.”¹² Though debates persist about the exact calling of the universal church in

Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History, and Issues* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014); Lesslie Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (London: International Missionary Council, 1959).

¹¹For an examination on how the kingdom of Christ unlocks the grand narrative of the Bible, see Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004).

¹²*Ad Gentes: On the Missionary Activity of the Church*, The Roman Catholic Church, 1965.

this era, a baseline consensus amongst evangelicals agree that the centrality of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection are essential components of the gospel message.¹³

The church is God's colony or outpost on the earth bearing institutional witness to God's mission in the world. A confidence surrounds the church's mission as Jesus promises that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18). The church of Jesus Christ marches onward toward a heavenly city, where "the world will one day be the kingdom of God."¹⁴ As Goheen and Bartholomew write, "The good news that Jesus announces and enacts and that the church is commissioned to embody and make known, is the gospel of the kingdom."¹⁵

Personal

The Son sent by God sends out individual heralds of the kingdom (John 17:18 & 20:21). By Jesus Christ commanding his followers to "make disciples of all the nations," he gives this missionary command according to his own authority (Matt 28:18). Christians are called to display personal commitment to advancing God's kingdom in their lives by sharing their faith so that others may enter God's kingdom (Col 1:13). The call to make disciples and to advance God's kingdom reveals that "Christianity is intrinsically missionary" meaning that God's mission is participatory by God using the means of the gathered and scattered church to fulfill his mission.¹⁶ Christians are therefore evangelistic in its missionary efforts and utterances.

¹³For representative camps between "Transformationalist" approaches to missiology and a Reformed Two kingdoms view of mission, see Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*

¹⁴Goheen and Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads*, 2.

¹⁵Goheen and Bartholomew, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 2.

¹⁶Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 9.

Cultural-Imperial

The gospel itself is announced as a kingdom, a term with overt political connotation. Jesus calls on the reigning political paradigm of his own day to explain the significance of his own kingdom. Though exercising caution in using the term kingdom, the implication of the gospel taking root in persons united within a common culture has cultural and political ramifications. On the one hand, Christians should not hesitate to expect that the gospel would have cultural-political repercussions in society as the requirements for Christian conceptions of humaneness and justice proclaim judgment on the world. As Carl F. H. Henry once declared, it is the responsibility of the church to “declare the criteria by which nations will ultimately be judged, and the divine standards to which man and society must conform if civilization is to endure.”¹⁷ John Stott argues that the righteousness of the kingdom “spills over” into the world.¹⁸ While political dominance is not the object of Christian mission, it can become a consequence of the gospel’s success in forming the consciences of those within a political community.

On the other hand, announcing that the gospel has political implications is categorically different than positing that the intent of the Christian gospel is itself political. The mission of God can rightly subvert an empire with God’s own empire—but this is done through the advancement of God’s kingdom and the transformation of consciences, not as a top-down political initiative meant to make Christianity proper a political program. The kingdom of God is indeed a threat to the governing powers of this world who view themselves as sovereign and unaccountable. Regardless of how one chooses to regard the cultural and political implications of Christian mission, Christian mission is always situated within a historical-cultural milieu, where attitudes toward religious liberty may vary, and which will invariably shape the nature of the church’s

¹⁷Carl F. H. Henry, “An Ecumenical Bombshell,” *Christianity Today*, September 15, 1967, 28.

¹⁸Stott and Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 19.

mission in that context. The purpose of that mission, regardless of context, is timeless because the “gospel is an announcement about where God is moving the history of the whole world.”¹⁹ That movement of history is accomplished through a mission that began in a garden and which will be fulfilled in a city (Gen 2:8; Rev 21:2).²⁰

If any point has been strenuously argued in this dissertation, it is the centrality of Jesus Christ—as both king and the true image of God—that is the foil for Christian reflection on the substance and purpose of religious liberty. This is no less true in the context of Christian mission and what God is accomplishing through mission; namely, the enlargement of Jesus’s kingdom and the means through which this advancement occurs.

The Mission of God and Religious Liberty: Understanding the Soteriological Nexus

According to Stott and Wright, “The God who is Lord of history is also the Judge of History.”²¹ From this sentence arises a sense of urgency because the current era in which the church finds itself is not promised to be eternal. A coming judgment awaits. The reality of this coming future judgment is the catalyst for religious liberty’s connection point with mission. According to Baptist historical theologian Jason Duesing,

Thus, as those living in an era of religious liberty between the time of Christ’s ascension and his certain return, the knowledge of what awaits us on the last day should serve as a warning to all outside of Christ that the freedom to worship other gods without the judgment of the one true God will come to an end.²²

¹⁹Goheen and Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads*, 2.

²⁰T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009).

²¹Stott and Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 18.

²²Jason G. Duesing, “The End of Religious Liberty,” in *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Liberty*, ed. Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B & H, 2016), 255.

It is correct to infer that religious liberty is not an end in itself. Instead, it is a means and a tool that the church utilizes to accomplish its mission with efficiency and effectiveness for the sake of the gospel. This is where social ethics and mission form a critical nexus that justifies evaluating religious liberty as an intrinsically useful and necessary device for Christian mission. As two scholars argue, “Christian witness is not an area where ethics do not apply; it requires an ethical foundation so that we truly do what Christ has instructed us to do.”²³ Religious liberty is therefore foundational to a public theology of mission. Religious liberty is an ethic of the church’s mission in the world. Christianity prioritizes religious liberty as an evangelistic tool. Where Christianity has any influence in society, a milieu of religious liberty ought to follow from Christian teaching when Christians apply their doctrine to society and seek to influence it.

With the “why” of Christian mission completed by the “how” provided by religious liberty, religious liberty is an ethic of evangelism critical to the advancement of Christian mission. E. Glenn Hinson correctly observes that Christianity’s concern for religious liberty is inextricably bound up with its mission:

Christianity has a large stake in the conservation of religious liberty. As a strong missionary faith, Christianity is concerned not merely to preserve toleration but to preserve also the right to evangelize. Where religious liberty is limited, Christianity’s discharging of its mission will be limited. The dangers should be more clearly perceived by Christians than by any other religious group.²⁴

The command by Christ that his followers make disciples of all the nations assumes an approach and pathway for the Great Commission to go forward. As Carl F. H. Henry writes concerning Christians begging and pleading with individuals to trust in Jesus Christ, “a critical historical situation establishes the urgency of proclaiming the

²³Thomas Schirrmacher and Richard Howell, “Freedom of Religion or Belief from a Biblical Perspective,” in *Freedom of Belief and Christian Mission*, ed. Hans Aage Gravaas et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 24.

²⁴E. Glenn Hinson, *Religious Liberty: The Christian Roots of Our Fundamental Freedoms* (Louisville: Glad River Publishing, 1991), 133.

gospel and the disciples are to implore God because of this dire plight of the masses.”²⁵ Those heralding the gospel will exercise every tool at their disposal to see the mission of God advance. Moreover, the “historical situation” that Henry references is consequential to understanding that Christian mission is always historically situated and contextual, and “situatedness” is not a missionally insignificant category. Christians should desire to inhabit contexts that make gospel proclamation and evangelistic efforts more fluid, and reject circumstances that create obstacles to gospel advancement.

If Christians care about mission, Christians ought to care to elevate religious liberty as a preeminent concern in evangelistic efforts. Christians should care, not because Christian mission is decidedly contingent upon religious liberty, but rather, because religious liberty aides Christian mission in its ultimate task of seeing individuals reconciled and redeemed.²⁶ Understood through an evangelistic lens, religious liberty is what beggars and pleaders appreciate for its utility, but not as a necessity. As ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor 5:20), a religious liberty principle underlies the reality of urgency:

Just as earnestly as God is entreated to send workers, just so earnestly the lost world is begged in turn to become reconciled to God. An unmistakable spiritual connection exists between the sense of urgent harvest that implores God for workers

²⁵Carl F. H. Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization: The Drift toward Neo-Paganism* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), 46.

²⁶It is understandable that a sentence like this could potentially undermine the overall argument of this chapter, so an important caveat is necessary. The kingdom of God belongs to God and will go where God deems it to go. This means that Christianity can prosper in the harshest of contexts; contexts that regard Christianity as a threat. What this chapter is intending to argue is that, as a practical matter concerning the church’s cognizance of its place in society, religious liberty ought to be valued and prioritized. It is appropriate to strike a balance between active cultivation of religious liberty in society on the part of the church while at the same time recognizing that the providential hand of God directs history according to his own will and no context is impenetrable where God wishes to miraculously intervene. Religious liberty is a benefit that Christians should advance and defend, while also recognizing that Christian mission, in the providence of God, is ascendant regardless of what context surrounds the church’s mission. Indeed, it is indisputable that contexts most hostile to religious liberty are also the same contexts where the church’s faithfulness shines most bright.

and the sense of urgency with which the commission worker himself reaches out to the beleaguered world.²⁷

Religious liberty is not simply a political doctrine that Western Christians enjoy living amidst liberal democracies. Religious liberty is a principle that Christians from all corners of the world ought to prioritize for its effect on gospel advancement and social tranquility; it is a principle and social ethic that forges a nexus between the urgent task of mission and the opportunity to take that urgent mission outward.

Most foundationally, however, religious liberty understood from the interior of biblical logic, understands it as a principle integral and internal to the gospel itself and essential in how it serves the church's mission in society. According to Barrett Duke, "The doctrine of salvation itself contributes to our understanding of God's design for religious liberty."²⁸ Soteriology, according to Duke, is an individual event and the biblical witness of how faith is received shows that faith cannot be coerced, and conversely, the gospel hinges upon a free response. Freedom itself underlies authentic faith.²⁹ An evangelical account of religious liberty as mission thus relies upon a doctrine of justification by faith alone, insisting that individuals enter God's kingdom individually and conscientiously self-aware of an expressed faith. No one can attain someone else's salvation for them, and neither can someone's salvation be negated by another. Even more foundationally, a focus on the theological underpinnings of religious liberty and the mission of God fosters a greater awareness of the church's own rationale for advancing religious liberty in society: humanity's destined judgment.

Christian advocacy for religious liberty in society is not pursued primarily to shore up or preserve the reigning political order. As Michael Hanby convincingly argues,

²⁷Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 47.

²⁸Barrett Duke, "The Christian Doctrine of Religious Liberty," in Duesing, White, and Yarnell, *First Freedom*, 22.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 22.

disproportionate concern for only the juridical or political benefits of religious liberty as a social practice, overlooks or neglects the “deeper freedom opened up by the transcendent horizon of Christ’s resurrection.”³⁰ Hanby offers a stinging indictment on an outsized Christian focus on religious liberty to the neglect of its overall purpose in light of the church’s mission:

If we cannot see beyond the juridical meaning of religious freedom to the freedom that the truth itself gives, how then can we expect to exercise this more fundamental freedom when our juridical freedom is denied? Too often we are content to accept the absolutism of liberal order, which consists in its capacity to establish *itself* as the ultimate horizon, to remake everything within that horizon in its own image, and to establish itself as the highest good and the condition of possibility for the pursuit of all other goods—including religious freedom.³¹

The locus of Christian advocacy for religious liberty is the advancement of Christian mission. This focus on mission is not to undercut or devalue the political and social benefits with which religious liberty graces society (later in this chapter, it will be strenuously argued that Christian advocacy for religious liberty ought to result in practical social benefits). But implications that follow from Christianity’s primary justification for religious liberty should not blur or erase the urgency with which Christians offer steadfast advocacy for its centrality to Christian social ethics and public theology—the advancement of God’s kingdom resulting in the salvation of sinners.

Far from religious liberty being an issue of downrange importance or an issue that seeks to downplay religious difference to further civil religion or relativism, religious liberty exists because it issues from a place of sincere urgency, emanating from sober conviction about the judgment awaiting humanity. Any practice of religion that fails to desire liberty as a critical element to its own doctrinal system only pretends to be authentic. Half-hearted religion works as a “kind of inoculation or prevention against

³⁰Michael Hanby, “The Civic Project of American Christianity,” *First Things*, no. 250 (February 2015): 36.

³¹*Ibid.*

sincere religion.”³² Only religions so adamant in their dogma about the judgment of God will seek the freedoms to advance that message for the sake of humankind.³³ Heartfelt convictions will always seek the liberty to be proclaimed.

Religious Liberty and Mission as Eschatological Judgment

This section briefly investigates the relationship between religious liberty and eschatological judgment, demonstrating that mission and soteriology are the point of convergence that gives shape to the pursuit of religious liberty being a preeminent pillar in evangelical social ethics.

The motive behind advocating for religious liberty is the aid such a social ethic offers for gospel proclamation. As argued previously, because Jesus Christ is the ultimate Lord over the conscience, a Christian understanding of religious liberty begins with affirming that Christ alone possesses the ability to execute judgment over the conscience (Acts 17:30-31). Because Christ possesses the exclusive right and authority to judge erring consciences, the institutions of creation (family, church, state) do not. Religious liberty exists because of the forbearance of God’s coming judgment. Whatever other themes comprise religious liberty (dual jurisdictions, the conscience, voluntary faith, etc.), all of these find their meaning in reference to the Lordship of Jesus Christ as the appointed judge over humanity (John 5:22; Heb 9:27).

This reality that Jesus Christ is King over the conscience and possesses sole authority to execute judgment over the conscience is the absolute foundation for a Christian understanding of religious liberty. Though not an orthodox spokesman, John

³²Edwin S. Gaustad, *Roger Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 41.

³³This is, interestingly, one of the motives behind Baptist icon Roger William’s advocacy for religious liberty. For Williams, religious liberty was not a matter of practical indifference between religions. Religious liberty matters because the convictions that encourage the need for religious liberty are of utter sincerity. *Ibid.*, 107.

Locke was correct to note that “Only the Supreme Judge of all men” possesses the wisdom for “the chastisement of the erroneous.”³⁴ It is also the firmament for religious liberty’s social relevance. Christians should desire a society where human institutions do not act as judges over the conscience. Argued previously, the domain of the conscience is outside the sphere of the state or other human institutions. Because Jesus is judge over the conscience, human institutions and individuals are not. According to Acts 17:30-31,

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

These verses have functioned as a sort of lodestar to this entire dissertation, since Paul’s declaration in this setting encompasses so much of the underlying themes of religious liberty that are relevant to this dissertation. According to the Apostle Paul, God is going to judge the world by Jesus. Paul’s declaration comes at the Areopagus, “Mars Hill,” a public venue where disputation on wide-ranging philosophical debates was known to occur (Acts 17:21).

The reality of future eschatological judgment underwrites the rationale for Paul’s proclamation (Acts 17:30-31; Rom 2:12-16; 2 Cor 5:10). At the Areopagus in particular, the nature of that proclamation has a current or ecology underneath it that makes public proclamation urgently necessary. The nature and opportunity of Paul’s address being public assumes some type of latitude or posture toward a person’s ability to publicly proclaim the gospel. Religious liberty, then, is more than simply a vehicle of transmission; though it is never less than that. Religious liberty understood from its most critical interior is the public declaration of forewarned eschatological judgment made known in the present. If religious liberty aids in pronouncement, the substance of that pronouncement hinges upon the liberty to furnish it.

³⁴John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. James H. Tully (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 27.

Religious Liberty and Mission as Eschatological Blessing

For fear of depicting religious liberty in wholly negative terms that pronounce judgement only, religious liberty is essential to Christian mission for its promise of eschatological blessing.³⁵ Religious liberty itself is not the eschatological blessing, but facilitates the message that pronounces and enacts eschatological blessing. Revisiting Acts 17 and Paul's visit to the Areopagus again, in verse 34 it is revealed that "some men joined him and believed" in the resurrection that Paul proclaimed. The proclamation in which Paul freely engaged resulted in persons believing in the gospel. Religious liberty is a platform allowing persons to enter into the blessings of salvation. Religious liberty facilitates how a person receives eschatological blessing—both, again, in terms of how one receives the gospel freely and authentically, yet also in how one encounters the message itself.

If religious liberty is understood as the means upon which an individual encounters the gospel and responds freely and authentically, religious liberty is then critical to persons experiencing salvation from God. The logic of the gospel (proclamation, free response, authentic belief that is non-coerced), again, relies on mechanisms that are tied to religious liberty because religious liberty hinges upon open proclamation, and a free response that is non-coerced. Individuals experience the blessings of salvation as a result of hearing the gospel. The means of how the gospel reaches those individuals is not insignificant. Religious liberty is thus critical to mission because it is the means by which individuals experience the down-payment of eschatological blessing in the present (Eph 1:3-14). The act of gospel proclamation results in a divine "transference" where an unbeliever is shuttled from the "domain of darkness" to the "kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col 1:13). The nature of that "transference" requires that there be such liberty and opportunity to make such transference possible.

³⁵I am indebted to my colleague Daniel Patterson for this category description.

Religious Liberty and Evangelism

Moreover, when one looks at the biblical witness and the methods used to advance the gospel, it is evidence that a combination of themes underlying religious liberty are at the heart of Christian mission.

It is common to hear religious liberty advanced under the banner of the “free market of ideas.” While exercising caution in reducing evangelism to ideas associated with free market capitalism, an important truth underlies a Christian approach to evangelism that is central to themes surrounding religious liberty. If the gospel is true, the gospel does not need government preference to back it up. Why? Because in the full scope of history, truth wins. Truth needs nothing other than itself for persuasion. As Baptist statesman John Leland wrote:

It is error, and error alone, that needs human support; and whenever men fly to the law or sword to protect their system of religion, and force it upon others, it is evident that they have something in their system that will not bear the light, and stand upon the basis of truth upon it.³⁶

Religious liberty is thus an expression of Christian confidence in the gospel. It is an independence from artificial supports that would attempt to bolster the credibility of the gospel apart from the gospel itself. According to Christian mission, the gospel needs no subsidy nor aid from the state to stand on its own. The gospel needs not the bejeweled trappings of salesmanship or a sword-drawn threat. Those with ears to hear, will hear (Matt 11:15). Humanity is not under compulsion to accept the blessings of Christ. The freedom of the Rich Young Ruler to reject Christ was met with no earthly punishment (Luke 18:18-30). As one commentator observes, “God as disclosed in Jesus Christ is neither arbitrary nor coercive. It is an essential characteristic of the Gospel that God himself did not use force to win our allegiance.”³⁷

³⁶John Leland, “The Rights of Conscience Inalienable,” in *The Writings of John Leland*, ed. L. F. Greene (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969), 185.

³⁷A. F. Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty* (New York: Association Press, 1963), 63.

Paul's public witness shows he did not fear a place where there was a free market of ideas, but rather used such a context as an opportunity for argument and persuasion as a means to spread the gospel. Indeed, the apostolic witness of the New Testaments asserts the priority of conscience against the claims and protestations of government authorities in order to proclaim the gospel (Acts 5:29).

Paul never backed away from the strange claim that God raised Jesus from the dead—he used persuasion, argument, and an appeal to conscience to advance the gospel. The gospel only advances in convicted consciences; it never advances through coerced consciences. When looking at the biblical text in particular, “reason” (discussion and conversation aimed to persuade individuals) is a method consistent with evangelism (Acts 17:7; 18:4; 19:8-9; 24:25). The methods of evangelism in Scripture assume principles constitutive of religious liberty.

Paul at the Areopagus is a useful example of seeing how themes consonant with religious liberty (persuasion, reason, proclamation, free response) are at the heart of evangelistic efforts amidst pluralistic settings.³⁸ For Paul, a pluralistic setting was not an obstacle to making an exclusivist claim concerning soteriology. Paul explicitly invokes Jesus and the resurrection to his hearers, doing so by exploiting their assumptions and redirecting them to see how Christ fulfills their own metaphysical view of creation and reality. According to J. Daryl Charles, Paul “contrasts pagan inclusivity with Christian exclusivity.”³⁹ That is instructive for missiology because it demonstrates that religious liberty operates according to sincerity of conviction and Christianity's messengers need not downplay the strength of its message for it to be received.

³⁸For an excellent review of Paul's evangelism strategy at Mars Hill, see J. Daryl Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 45-54.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 51.

Religious liberty and general revelation. For mission to proceed, and for religious liberty to play its proper role in facilitating mission, an account of general revelation will have to enter into consideration.⁴⁰ General revelation is the nexus that makes communication of the gospel intelligible between persons. Greg Forster notes how the “Bible does not at any point present a philosophical argument that there is such a thing as right and wrong.”⁴¹ Instead, “the Bible consistently assumes that the reader is already aware of right and wrong without needing the Bible to establish that distinction.”⁴² Speaking of moral consensus and the knowledge of moral law that makes individuals culpable before God, J. Daryl Charles rightfully argues, “Apart from natural law, which expresses general—that is to say, indirect—revelation to which all are held accountable, fulfilling this mandate is impossible. General revelation furnishes the basis on which Christians and non-Christians relate to one another.”⁴³ Religious liberty understood as the expressed ability to bear witness to the gospel assumes a ground of intelligibility between Christians and non-Christians. Religious liberty, then, is an outworking of general revelation that makes rational communication possible.

Whatever taxonomical differences may arise between “natural law” and “general revelation,” Charles’s point is important: the ability to communicate the gospel without external coercion assumes a communicative intelligibility wherein persons understand their guilt and freely respond to the gospel. Again, Charles states, “While general revelation is insufficient to justify humans before their Creator, it does give all

⁴⁰For a helpful explanation into the concept of general revelation, see Baptist theologian and ethicist Russell Moore, “Natural Revelation,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin and Paige Patterson (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 71-117.

⁴¹Greg Forster, *The Contested Public Square: The Crisis of Christianity and Politics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 29.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law*, 63.

people a minimal knowledge of the Creator as well as the moral standard to which all will be held accountable.”⁴⁴ For the gospel to take root, an individual must possess the faculties to know right from wrong, which then inspires repentance and faith.

General revelation is not insignificant in what it avails religious liberty. An emphasis on religious liberty will animate a focus on general revelation because general revelation provides the epistemological, communicative, and moral grammar prerequisite to salvation.

Religious liberty and the church’s mission in society. God’s mission for the church is to proclaim the message of the gospel and make disciples meaning that churches should never be static or existing just for themselves. The mission of the church incorporates religious liberty into a portfolio of concerns because, ultimately, according to James Wood, “the ultimate concern of the Christian for religious freedom is that the Church may be the church.” A. F. Carrillo De Albornoz notes that the church’s exercise of religious liberty is part of its “responsibility” as being the church. According to Albornoz, “The first main duty of the responsible church concerning religious liberty is to practice it, to proclaim it and to be its herald before society.”⁴⁵ This means that religious liberty is at the heart of church mission. From proclamation to tangible acts of ministry in the community, the church will capture a vision for religious liberty to the extent that the church responds in obedience to God purpose for the church’s mission in society.⁴⁶

Capturing how the church’s mission relates to religious liberty, Wood poignantly observes,

The very integrity of the Church is rooted in religious freedom which points not simply to a free Church but, more importantly, to a true Church as God's agent of reconciliation which is seeking in his name and in his spirit to bring all men to God.

⁴⁴Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law*, 63.

⁴⁵Carrillo de Albornoz, *The Basis of Religious Liberty*, 115.

⁴⁶James E. Wood, “A Biblical View of Religious Liberty,” *The Ecumenical Review* 30, no. 1 (January 1978): 40.

The Church seeks to be free, not for its own sake, but in order to be God's servant in the world, remembering always that Jesus said: "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to me"—words rooted in love and freedom.⁴⁷

James Spivey argues that the mission of the church must reject the Erastian temptation to allow the church's mission to be subsumed under the state's authority. "In order for true religion to convince seekers that the gospel is credible," argues Spivey, "it must compete in the marketplace of ideas without artificial help from the state."⁴⁸

Where medieval Christendom treated membership in the church and membership in the state as one and the same, the prospect of a voluntary church consisting only of those with expressed faith in Jesus Christ makes possible the critical division necessary to identify the church as something distinct from the world and the church's mission to the world. A flourishing church is a church that understands its distinctiveness and its calling to be an outpost of the kingdom of God. A free church operating in a free state may pursue its mission of evangelization and disciple-making. A free church model made up only of those with professed faith in Christ is possible when government does not see the church as a useful appendage to enforce cultural, religious, or political conformity.

Furthermore, a trust in the state for assistance in the church's mission reveals a lack of trust in God to fulfill his mission. Allying with state power amounts to "blasphemy by arrogating to itself a pretended power which Christ himself never claimed. In fact, true religion separates itself from worldly power."⁴⁹ The church, by refusing the temptation to worldly power and the possibility of using coercive dominance in society, and by emptying itself of worldly power, more ably allows it to channel divine power and divine mandate that birthed it. An authentic church will rely upon the power of the Spirit animating it and not at an amassed power to privilege it. Considered a loss by the world's standards, the

⁴⁷Wood, "A Biblical View of Religious Liberty," 40.

⁴⁸Jim Spivey, "Separation No Myth: Religious Liberty's Biblical and Theological Bases," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 36, no. 3 (1994): 13.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

church that chooses to operate from a position of social equality granted to it by religious liberty, will see religious liberty as an opportunity to carry forth its message rightly and boldly.

A church embracing religious liberty without the attending privileges of state empowerment is a church that more accurately perceives its own understanding of mission in the world. The form of religious liberty advocated in this chapter acknowledges the great miseries that have resulted from the majority of Christian history forming compacts and allegiances with governments, kings, and legislatures.⁵⁰ The Christian church cannot look back at history guiltless from the tragedies that followed from church and state united with one another. As argued previously, the seeds of religious liberty are unique to Christian history and present from the beginning, but the failure of religious liberty is a mark of the church's imperfection and inconsistency. As political historian Matthew Franck correctly observes about a renaissance of religious liberty happening in Western contexts, "[T]he story of religious freedom is, in some sense, a tale of Christianity purifying itself."⁵¹

As Spivey further argues, religious liberty ought to be an attractive feature to Christian mission in how it develops "voluntary societies to mediate the gospel in a social context by removing the impediments of establishmentarianism, separation of church and state unleashes the full power of the gospel to accomplish genuine evangelism."⁵² Furthermore, the very nature of the church as a gathered body distinct from the world and

⁵⁰For a review of church's abuses stemming from church-state alliances, see Perez Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁵¹Matthew J. Franck, "Two Tales: Getting the Origins of Religious Liberty Right Matters," *Touchstone*, August 2016, 23.

⁵²Spivey, "Separation No Myth," 14.

the state implies the freedom to clearly demarcate what constitutes faithfulness. Advancing mission, thus, requires the church to differentiate itself for the mission to go forward.⁵³

The responsible church sensitive to the realities of religious liberty will also see that church-state separation and distance from power centers provides the church with prophetic edge and opportunity in society that it would not otherwise have. The liberty that comes from separation allows a pure message untainted by worldly influence and corruptions to call to repentance individuals within society ensnared in immorality and stoking injustice. True reform comes from true preaching. A church smitten with its own power and privilege will be deaf and blind to the possibility of internal reform.⁵⁴

Religious liberty applied to the church's mission, according to Russell Moore, "helps keep Christianity strange."⁵⁵ Stanley Hauerwas is right to observe the temptation that can come not only from established religion, but from the failure to use religion freedom in a Christian manner. According to Hauerwas, "The question is not whether the church has the freedom to preach the gospel in America, but rather whether the church in America preaches gospel as the truth."⁵⁶ A church can possess all the requisite freedoms it desires and still not preach a true gospel. However, a doctrine of religious liberty frees the church to be the church that God is calling it to be in society.

⁵³John David Hughey, "The Theological Frame of Religious Liberty," *The Christian Century* 80, no. 45 (November 1963): 1367.

⁵⁴All one has to do to prove this observation is look at the abuses of medieval Catholicism. Its comfort with social power made it lethargic to reformation, and so the Reformation happened.

⁵⁵Russell Moore, "Signposts: Why Christians Must Keep Christianity Strange," August 19, 2016, accessed October 12, 2017, <http://www.russellmoore.com/2016/08/19/signposts-why-christians-must-keep-christianity-strange/>.

⁵⁶Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 71.

The Moral Ecology of Christian Mission: Religious Liberty as a Soteriological Apologetic for Public Square Witness

Religious liberty as mission within social ethics and public theology is animated by Christianity's missionary zeal for God's glory being exalted from every tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev 7:9). Religious liberty is, definitionally speaking, a centrifugal doctrine in that its purpose is the exercise of religious conviction toward some further end; that telos, according to Christian interpretation, is the salvation of individuals. Religious liberty is intrinsically social and public since the liberty at stake for Christian proclamation seeks public reception. As it concerns religious liberty and Christian mission, indifference to issues confronting Christianity in society is not permissible.

This section investigates the implications of Christian mission on society more broadly, looking particularly at how concepts of pluralism and contestability are intrinsic to religious liberty and offer a framework for entering the public square to advance Christian mission in contexts where religious diversity exists. Further down, it examines how Christian mission advances a concept of the common good when understood as a dispensation of God's common grace in a penultimate era of contestability. This section seeks to advance the proposition that a concern for Christian mission produces a moral ecology of religious liberty not only for Christianity, but for the good of society as well. Religious liberty as a social ethic intrinsic to Christian mission produces socially beneficial consequences amenable to freedom and social tranquility.

Pluralism and Contestability as Christian Mission

Pluralism is a problem to the extent that any religious difference first exists because of Adam and Eve's rebellion (Rom 5:12). In the Garden of Eden, there was no pluralism, but there was the liberty to act in accord with God's creational intent.⁵⁷ And there will not be religious pluralism in the New Creation, but there will be religious

⁵⁷Religious liberty understood as the proper exercise of one's will toward its proper end.

liberty—religious liberty understood as the freedom to engage in what redeemed persons were designed: worship.

But nowhere in the interim era of the New Testament is government tasked with the responsibility of upholding Christian orthodoxy as a way to redress the reality of sin and pluralism.⁵⁸ Even Jesus Christ “refused to sit as a judge in secular matters, resisted the temptation to seize worldly power, and fled from those who would have crowned him king.”⁵⁹ Practically speaking, pluralism is a social arrangement wherein diverse people, of different religious or ideological persuasion, occupy a shared social space.⁶⁰ On a political level, pluralism is an admission that a principle of equality among religions in society means abandoning a partnership between church and state.⁶¹ As Carl F. H. Henry argues, “It is not the role of government to judge between rival systems of metaphysics and to legislate one among others. Government’s role is to protect and preserve a free course for its constitutional guarantees.”⁶² That fact is significant because it signifies a

⁵⁸For an insightful overview of the Old and New Testament’s understanding of church-state relations through the witness of Jesus, Pauline, and Johannine sources, see James E. Wood, E. Bruce Thompson, and Robert T. Miller, *Church and State in Scripture, History and Constitutional Law* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1985).

⁵⁹Spivey, “Separation No Myth,” 11.

⁶⁰For recent volumes and essays on the subject of Christian responses to pluralism, see Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*; John Briggs, “From Christendom to Pluralism,” in *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics*, ed. David F. Wright (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1979), 59-84; Jonathan Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity: From ‘Liberal Pluralism’ to ‘Christian Pluralism,’” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 35, no. 2 (2006): 143-75; James W. Skillen and Rockne McCarthy, eds., *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society*, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); James W. Skillen, *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

⁶¹Though practiced inconsistently in his own life, Abraham Kuyper’s doctrine of Sphere Sovereignty is informative for the understanding of pluralism argued for here. According to Kuyper, “Every attempt by political authority to try and rule over one of those other areas is therefore a violation of God’s ordinances, and resistance to it is not a crime but a duty.” Abraham Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*, ed. Harry Van Dyke, Jordan J. Ballor, and Melvin Flikkema, *Collected Works in Public Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015), 21.

⁶²Carl F. H. Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society: Promoting Evangelical Renewal & National Righteousness* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1984), 80.

theologically-informed principle of separation and the admission that government does not act as a referee amid religious diversity.⁶³ This makes pluralism a reality from living within a penultimate age.⁶⁴ According to Oliver O'Donovan, pluralism is a "metaphysic of society, at once a way of reading the world and a way of reacting to it."⁶⁵ According to Dallas Willard, "pluralism simply means that social or political force is not to be used to suppress the freedom of thought and expression of any citizen, or even the practice that flows from it, insofar as that practice is not morally wrong."⁶⁶

But the question remains as to whether the reality of pluralism bears any intrinsic connection to soteriological concerns.⁶⁷ Reformed theologian John Piper has advanced the provocative argument that Jesus as the judge over the conscience is the ground of religious tolerance and, by implication, religious liberty.⁶⁸ He further argues

⁶³Roger Williams' famous quip also bears relevance: "God requireth not an uniformity of religion to be enacted and enforced in any civil state." Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, ed. Richard Groves (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002), 13.

⁶⁴VanDrunen's description of the current penultimate era is instructive. In David VanDrunen, "The Importance of the Penultimate: Reformed Social Thought and the Contemporary Critiques of the Liberal Society," *The Journal of Markets & Morality* 9, no. 2 (September 2006): 235, he writes, Religious and metaphysical pluralism is at the very least a fact, a basic reality of Western society at the present moment and for many centuries past. More than that, religious and metaphysical pluralism is what Scripture suggests we should *expect* in society during this interim, inchoate period between the comings of Christ. Christians live in two kingdoms, and the civil kingdom, by God's ordination, is a mixed realm, not reserved exclusively for believers in Christ but designed for humanity as a whole in which to pursue its cultural task.

⁶⁵Oliver O'Donovan, "Reflections on Pluralism," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 29 (2008): 55.

⁶⁶Dallas Willard, "Being a Christian in a Pluralistic Society," 1992, accessed October 25, 2017, <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=17>.

⁶⁷A summary of Piper's argument from chap. 2: "Jesus Christ, the source and ground of all truth, will himself one day bring an end to all tolerance, and he alone will be exalted as the one and only Lord and Savior and Judge of the universe. Therefore, since Jesus Christ alone, the Creator and Lord of history, has the right to wield the tolerance-ending sword, we dare not." John Piper, "Jesus Christ: The End and Ground of Tolerance," *Desiring God*, May 12, 2002, accessed October 21, 2017, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/jesus-christ-the-end-and-ground-of-tolerance>.

⁶⁸Regrettably, Piper's comments are made in a blog post, and not produced elsewhere in a more academic volume. Argument is argument regardless of where arguments are made, but it is worth acknowledging that a blog post is not an ideal source to cite from for an academic dissertation. Piper's comments on religious liberty and pluralism are sufficiently original and insightful that one wishes they

that it supplies Christianity with a normative understanding of societal pluralism. Piper frames his answer to the question of pluralism's intelligibility by asking,

So, how do we express a passion for God's supremacy in a pluralistic world where most people do not recognize God as an important part of their lives, let alone an important part of government or education or business or industry or art or recreation or entertainment?⁶⁹

He answers with the following:

By making clear that God himself is the foundation for our commitment to a pluralistic democratic order—not because pluralism is his ultimate ideal, but because in a fallen world, legal coercion will not produce the kingdom of God. Christians agree to make room for non-Christian faiths (including naturalistic, materialistic faiths), not because commitment to God's supremacy is unimportant, but because it must be voluntary, or it is worthless.⁷⁰

Piper concludes,

We believe this tolerance is rooted in the very nature of the gospel of Christ. In one sense, tolerance is pragmatic: freedom and democracy seem to be the best political order humans have conceived. But for Christians it is not purely pragmatic: the spiritual, relational nature of God's kingdom is the ground of our endorsement of pluralism, until Christ comes with rights and authority that we do not have.⁷¹

Piper's argument has much to commend. Far from being solely a pragmatic doctrine haphazardly relativizing religious difference, as Piper rightfully observes, religious liberty as a reality of social pluralism is a prerequisite of freedom that grounds stable political order and makes possible the realization of Christ's lordship. Additionally, Piper's argument that coercion does not produce faith is an insight into evangelism's relationship to the inner logic of the gospel: True mission advances only when faith is freely received. A pluralistic order, then, is a response simply to the lordship of Jesus Christ not fully enacted in the present.

were written about at length in book form.

⁶⁹John Piper, "Making Room for Atheism," *Desiring God*, August 10, 2005, accessed October 21, 2017, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/making-room-for-atheism>.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid.

S. M. Hutchens makes a similar argument, though one with which I have significant taxonomical disagreement. According to Hutchens, who criticizes the use of “religious freedom,” a Christian doctrine of pluralism amounts to God’s “forbearance and patience.”⁷² Rejecting outright any argument for religious freedom, Hutchens argues for a “teleology in which the sufferance of error . . . is met by condemnation and judgment.”⁷³ Ostensibly, Hutchens arrives at a position of religious liberty and pluralism, though eschewing any Enlightenment connotations the term might have. Arguments for pluralism based on divine judgment and forbearance, rather than as an active concession to the demands of liberal democracy offers a more attractive theological and Christological foundation for pluralism. Pluralism is a patient response to God’s promise of future judgment, or as Christian theologian and ethicist Richard Mouw writes, “Christian civility will display the patience that comes from knowing that the final accounting belongs to God.”⁷⁴ Because God promises to bring pluralism to an end, Christians cannot. The reality that pluralism and religious difference will not last into eternity is a catalyst for the church to use the mechanisms of a pluralistic society to announce that salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

Pluralism to the ears of Christians often takes on negative connotations since, left in the hands of theological liberalism and progressive secularism, it often reduces to empty-headed indifference or skepticism.⁷⁵ Pluralism ought not imply religious relativism. Moreover, pluralism is not anti-Christian or sub-Christian. It is an outgrowth

⁷²S. M. Hutchens, “Toleration and Divine Forbearance,” *Touchstone* 29, no. 4 (August 2016): 33.

⁷³*Ibid.*

⁷⁴Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: IVP, 2010), 143.

⁷⁵Schirrmacher and Howell, “Freedom of Religion or Belief,” 27, write, “One has to differentiate between advocating the human rights and religious freedom of adherents of other religions, or of individuals without any religious affiliation, and endorsing their claims to truth.”

of Christian reflection on human diversity done through successive eras of history as the church operates in society while awaiting promised judgment.

Pluralism is the social reality of a secular age. According to Mouw and Griffioen,

Disagreement about fundamental human issues is an inescapable fact of life under present conditions. If there were no other reason for orthodox Christian to endorse some version of pluralism, this alone would be sufficient to cause us to do so. When it comes to the issues of belief and unbelief, the Bible calls our attention to at least one basic plurality: the division within the human community between those who worship the true God and those who persist in their apostasy.⁷⁶

Recalling earlier arguments about the eschatological nature of secularism being an era of time between the resurrection and second coming, according to New Testament scholar Michael Bird, secularism “emerged as a religious project to create a sphere where the moral equality of humanity could be expressed in the form of freedom of conscience and action.”⁷⁷ This “sphere” is the horizon wherein mission takes place, and which secularism, aided by a doctrine of religious liberty where church and state are not formally united, helps create. Larry Siedentop argues that secularism as an outgrowth of Christian social thinking was one of “Europe’s noblest achievements” because it contributed to an atmosphere where “different religious beliefs continue to contend for followers.”⁷⁸ Pluralism understood as a product of secularism is a way of making room for non-Christians. Sylie Avakien argues that a Christian doctrine of secularism, which grounds pluralism, allows for genuine Christian faith to flourish:

Only in a secular society, where unbelief is a possibility, has the individual the freedom either to take upon oneself the claims of Christian faith, or reject them. Further, it is only through a responsible taking upon oneself the claims of faith that

⁷⁶Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 106.

⁷⁷Michael F. Bird, *Free to Believe: Why We Must Stand Up for Religious Freedom and How We Can Do It* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

⁷⁸Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014), 360.

Christian faith might become one's own. I propose that this is the culmination of Reformation and it is this that secularization evokes.⁷⁹

Avakien's argument is a countervailing force against anti-Reformation bromides accusing secularism of fracturing the moral consensus birthed by Christendom.⁸⁰ Like Mouw referenced above, pluralism ought to invite civility and tolerance in a social context. If no one religion can claim particular privilege over another, it establishes a level playing field where religious actors are given equal footing and are less apt to engage in retributive acts of hostility that come from religious marginalization.⁸¹ Pluralism as a normative reality enables the free exchange of competing ideas, one that grounds an individual's search for meaning, purpose, and truth. In one of the most illuminating quotes on the nature of pluralism, Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain argues that the quest for truth produces a form of tolerance open to free inquiry and the possibility of truth through self-discovery:

There is real and genuine tolerance only when a man is firmly and absolutely convinced of a truth, or of what he holds to be truth, and when he at the same time recognizes the right of those who deny this truth to exist, and to contradict him, and to speak their own mind, not because they are free from truth but because they seek truth in their own way, and because he respects in them human nature and human dignity and those very resources and living springs of the intellect and of conscience which make them potentially capable of attaining the truth he loves, if someday they happen to see it.⁸²

When questions of pluralism arise, the conversation often reduces to simply the recognition that diversity exists. Pluralism is not concerned with diversity for

⁷⁹Sylvie Avakian, "Christianity and Secularisation in the West and the Middle East: A Theological Stance," *Journal of Religious History* 40, no. 3 (September 2016): 383.

⁸⁰For a representative volume, see Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012). For a rebuttal of Gregory's argument, see Horton's excellent review: Michael Horton, "A Review of The Unintended Reformation," *The Gospel Coalition*, February 15, 2016, accessed November 5, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/book-reviews-the-unintended-reformation>.

⁸¹On the relationship between religious liberty and decreased social hostility, see Timothy Samuel Shah et al., *Religious Freedom: Why Now? Defending an Embattled Human Right* (Princeton, NJ: Witherspoon Institute, 2012), chap. 2

⁸²Jacques Maritain, *On the Use of Philosophy: Three Essays*, Princeton Legacy Library (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 24.

diversity's sake, but for the ability of rigorous debate to occur among diverse perspectives in order that conclusions and truth may be reached. Only in a society committed to the vigorous pursuit of truth, where those conclusions are held humbly yet firmly, will there be religious liberty. From this vantage point, the possibility of religious liberty offers an exchange of argument to occur that results in personal awareness of error.

Much of a Christian paradigm of pluralism understands that society is diverse organically. The givenness of difference is a Kuyperian theme, one that understands that the organic nature of society demands “mutual recognition” and an “absence of coercion or persecution.”⁸³ The Christian thus sees the pluralistic society as an open invitation in which Christian mission can participate. Shorn of government privilege that would inoculate citizens from authentic Christianity, Christianity countenances a warm embrace of pluralism by seeing debate and contestability as a “friend of the gospel” and one that “paves the way” for the gospel's advancement.⁸⁴ It is also critical to see that the opposite of pluralism, one where some type of formal or even informal church-state establishment exists, inhibits Christian mission by drawing incorrect lines around what constitutes faithfulness. According to Kuyper,

Free, because once government starts to weed, it can easily mistake wheat for tares. Free also, because once these opponents of Christianity are beaten back, they can boast that they were not beaten fairly but only yielded to force. Free above all, however, because Christianity itself needs this constant dueling with champions from other camps and must prove its moral superiority by triumphing in a strictly spiritual battle.⁸⁵

Therefore, in the interest of clearly demarcating what is and is not authentic Christianity, Christians should embrace a pluralistic context if it means leaving the church free to clearly understand itself and its mission in society. Pluralism is thus a

⁸³Peter Somers Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 156.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁵Kuyper, *Our Program*, 68.

purifying element to Christian mission that allows the church to be confident of its own mission without the need of false supports or corrupting power centers.

Contestability. More must be said about the social conditions that pluralism entail. Earlier in chapter 2, it was argued that the twin pillars of illiberalism surrounding religion are secularism (“seculocracy”) and theocracy. In each of these iterations, a dominating force overwhelms the other. In seculocracy, dismissal of religion leads to undermining civil society. In theocracy, destructive political forces wed to religion likewise undermine civil society. What legal philosopher Steven D. Smith calls the “principle of contestation” as a political matter translates aptly into the theological domain for the purposes of argument.⁸⁶ As a political matter, contestation is the reality that in free societies, “winners are provisional winners only.”⁸⁷ As a nation’s mood swings, so too does its politics. In similar fashion, applicable to what is argued for in this chapter, the reality of an imperfect society governed by fallen individuals means that orthodoxies come and go. A free society will and must be marked by vigorous debate, debate in which, at times, Christianity may possibly lose.

The benefits of a pluralist society, like Smith alluded to above, is that losers are provisional losers only.⁸⁸ It may be unsettling to resign one’s self to such a reality, but Christian mission must be governed by the sober-minded reality that in given contexts, Christianity’s influence waxes and wanes. At the writing of this dissertation, the long-term prospects for evangelical Christianity’s continued influence in America are discouraging. One can hope that whatever hardships may come for evangelicalism’s

⁸⁶Steven D. Smith, *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 101.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 102.

⁸⁸On the theological significance of Christianity’s influence waxing and waning throughout various periods of history, see Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 54.

witness in the coming years, a commitment to pluralism in which the Christian message retains the ability for free expression may be one of its greatest long-term hopes for continued presence and activity in the public square. Contestability may be one of Christian mission's most cherished principles in the coming years for the possibility it offers for continued dialogue and Christian witness in the public square.

The political reality of contestability is underwritten by a theological principle that precludes Christian social hegemony from being the dominant reality of our age. This penultimate secularity "points toward a political order to which we may not unreasonably apply the anachronistic epithet 'pluralist,' in that it is neutral in respect of ultimate beliefs and values."⁸⁹ According to Robert Markus, taking stock of the conditions of the penultimate age are essential in setting realistic goals for the current age. Markus writes that "tension, conflict, insecurity are woven into the texture of human existence in its sinful state and draw narrow limits to the responsibilities and the efficacy of public authorities."⁹⁰ Markus is arguing that the church finds itself at the center of this tension and conflict. Furthermore, according to Markus's reading of Augustine, "The agencies and institutions of society cannot serve to promote man's ultimate good; they serve only as a means to turn human ferocity itself to the fostering of a precarious order, some basic cohesion which Augustine called the earthly peace."⁹¹

This thinking reshapes the reality of what is possible while living in a penultimate era. It means, theologically speaking, that Christian expectation of social dominance is a form of over-realized eschatology. Speaking with regard to missional concerns, the pretense of an over-realized or triumphalist hegemony is one of the most

⁸⁹Markus, *Saeculum*, 151.

⁹⁰Robert A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 56.

⁹¹*Ibid.*

catastrophic effects undermining authentic Christian mission. The veneer of civil religion is an inoculating counterbalance to biblical Christianity.⁹² Augustine came to see that expecting the full Christianization of a social order apart from the eschaton is futile and a “dangerous delusion.” According to Markus, Augustine came to see that “Conflict over the ultimate purpose [of society] would be a permanent feature of society.”⁹³ This means a proper understanding of Christian mission requires understanding the time in which the church’s mission is operating within, and the time in which the Christian church operates is one of pluralism and contestability.

Ecology of Mission: Religious Liberty as the Common Good of Common Grace

A byproduct of Christian concern for religious liberty is its benefit for the common good of society. Religious liberty is evidence of God’s common grace toward humanity in allowing for a modicum of social stability to continue amid the multitude of diversity in society. Social cooperation in a fallen social order is an expression of God’s common grace. It should not be a surprise, then, that religious liberty has often been labeled as an “article of peace” for what it avails society.⁹⁴ This means that one practical consequence for religious liberty as a Christian social ethic is its transformational and common grace benefits for society. Common grace refers to the Reformed doctrine wherein God restrains the full effect of sin on society while also allowing positive

⁹²On the dangers of Christian nationalism and civil religion, see Soren Kierkegaard and Howard A. Johnson, *Kierkegaard’s Attack Upon “Christendom” 1854-1855*, trans. Walter Lowrie, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968); Stephen Backhouse, *Kierkegaard’s Critique of Christian Nationalism*, Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹³Markus, *Christianity and Secular*, 65.

⁹⁴James Davidson Hunter and Os Guinness, eds., *Articles of Faith, Articles of Peace: The Religious Liberty Clauses and the American Public Philosophy* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 1990); John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2005).

developments to occur in culture that benefits human civilization.⁹⁵ At a deeper level, however, common grace is evidence of God's patient calling of a wayward creation to salvation in Jesus Christ.

In the interest of clarity and for fear of being misinterpreted, let this be restated again: A practical result of Christianity's focus on religious liberty, understood as helping accomplish its mission in society, is the social consequences that follow from religious liberty when construed as inherently Christian. Religious liberty is a Christian principle that will benefit society insofar as Christianity bears any social consequence at all. In sum, Christianity produces a moral ecology of liberty, human flourishing, and social tranquility beneficial to society at large.⁹⁶ Christianity offers an indispensable support for a public ethic of religious liberty that can be expressly Christian but also applicable to society.

Religious liberty is not just about the freedom to believe in transcendent truths (though it is never about less than that). The theological framework has social

⁹⁵For more on the theme of common grace, see Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), 117-36; Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2015). Kuyper grounds a doctrine of common grace in the Noahic covenant. For more, see Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World, Volume 1*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor et al., *Collected Works in Public Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 10-13.

⁹⁶By *moral ecology*, I am referring to the moral conditions and habits of a society that give rise to morally negative or morally positive outcomes for individual persons and society at large. Allen D. Hertzke, "The Theory of Moral Ecology," *Review of Politics* 60, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 652, defines *moral ecology* as the following:

Societal mores, families, churches, mediating institutions, businesses, and the state constitute the soil, air, water, flora, and fauna of the moral ecosystem. And just as clean air or pristine forests are public goods, which the average individual cannot purchase, a healthy moral climate can be viewed similarly as a precious public good that individuals can only provision (or protect) through public efforts or the positive externalities of norms and social capital. The theory of moral ecology thus captures the combined effects of normative depredations, where a weakening in one part of the system will affect the capacity of the others to filter out moral toxins. Moreover, if moral toxins are allowed to accumulate, a dangerous threshold could be reached when the carrying capacity of the system is overwhelmed.

For more on the concept of moral ecology, see Harry M. Clor, *Public Morality Liberal Society: Essays on Decency, Law, and Pornography* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1996); Robert P. George, "The Concept of Public Morality," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 45, no. 1 (January 2000): 17-31; Robert P. George, *Making Men Moral: Civil Liberties and Public Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

outworkings that stem from the doctrine and ethic itself. Building once again on the theme of contestability, religious liberty is a fundamental principle that ties together the principles that underwrite free societies and allows differences of opinion the space to compete. Societies that allow for free speech, free association, and free assembly are the types of societies that understand citizens have beliefs and obligations that precede the demands and obligations of the state and civil society. This is why religious liberty is so central to building societies that are not only free, but understand that with freedom comes the corresponding duty of pluralism, respect, civility, kindness, and a commitment to diversity that allows freedom's reign. Debate and the free exchange of ideas can only occur in contexts that cultivate respect and a commitment to non-violence. To see these gifts as anything less than valuable assets to be deployed and welcomed in society for the sake of Christian mission is to possess a malnourished understanding of social mission and religious liberty. A commitment to religious liberty is a commitment to the principles that make life together as a diverse people possible. Religious liberty is therefore a fundamental principle that contributes to the common good, and Christianity is responsible for birthing this social ethic.⁹⁷

As a foundation to its commitment to upholding the integrity of the social order, Christians are committed to the common good. But Christianity is not committed to the common good out of generic principles such as solidarity or equality, as noble and necessary as both are. As Christians, the deepest commitments about advocacy for religious liberty and love of neighbor come from one essential angle: Because Jesus is Lord, there can be true freedom of conscience and religious liberty on the basis of an

⁹⁷It is my contention that religious liberty does in fact originate exclusively with Christianity. For more on the early origins of Christianity, see Timothy Samuel Shah, "The Roots of Religious Freedom in Early Christian Thought," in *Christianity and Freedom: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Allen D. Hertzke and Timothy Samuel Shah, Cambridge Studies in Law and Christianity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1:33-61; Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, "Lactantius on Religious Liberty and His Influence on Constantine," in *Christianity and Freedom*, 1:90-102; Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christian Roots of Religious Freedom* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2014).

enduring theological principle.⁹⁸ This means religious liberty, from a Christian perspective, offers a principled account for religious liberty. The Scriptures give people the right to be wrong. But the Scriptures do not allow these wrongs to go unaccounted.

Other worldviews do not regard this principle as inalienable. “Error has no rights”⁹⁹ is often a refrain issuing from any non-Christian worldview taken to its logical conclusion. If religious liberty is not grounded in transcendence, then it becomes a tool of convenience that can easily be denied when those in power decide to do away with any dissent.

Nature abhors a vacuum, as the saying is often heard. No less is that true concerning religious liberty. If Jesus Christ is not Lord, then something else in culture will inevitably attempt to masquerade in this role and the question is whether the ideology in question finds it beneficial to allow for diversity, which is no sure guarantee. Idolatrous ideologies that lack the promise of future judgment have no principled reason to respect religious freedom of conscience as something inviolable.¹⁰⁰ If religious liberty is denied, the “common good” easily becomes the province of whatever worldview has a majority stake in defining what the “good” is. This is why it is necessary for Christians to advocate for religious liberty in the public square. Christianity must not advocate for religious liberty just for Christians as a majoritarian political doctrine, but in the conviction that true freedom means allowing fellow citizens the right to freely exercise their beliefs with dignity—even when Christians think non-Christians are wrong and eternal judgment is at

⁹⁸I want to express gratitude to my friend, Joe Rigney, for helping me think through this insight with greater clarity.

⁹⁹This phrase is associated with Pope Pius’ IX’s encyclical “The Syllabus of Errors.” On the relationship between Roman Catholic magisterial teaching and its transformation throughout time, see Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching, 1891-Present: A Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002).

¹⁰⁰This line of argument is critical to my argument in chap. 5, showing that secular ideologies are inhospitable to an ethic of religious liberty.

stake. It is precisely because of an ultimate judge that Christians cannot be the judge of anyone else (Heb 9:27).

How though, practically, ought religious liberty as mission be understood as a benefit for the common good and as a gift of God's common grace? First, religious liberty benefits society by offering the practical application of neighborliness. Second, religious liberty is an essential contributor to the advancement of moral argument in society. Because religion informs ethics, it is incumbent for religious arguments to find appropriate means of translation or communication in society to advance their mission in society. So much of Christian mission and evangelism assumes a moral grammar between interlocutors. A religion unable to make religious and moral arguments will be a religion unable to engage in missional activity. Third, religious liberty as a critical element of Christian mission will want to find a rationale or justification for its involvement in matters of law and public policy in order to advance social tranquility.

Neighbor love. Religious liberty as neighbor love has two manifestations. First, the practice of religious liberty is itself practicing a form neighbor love. Allowing a person to live earnestly with their convictions, even in a state of error, shows love by respecting the integrity of their religious faculties and the sincerity to which their religious convictions manifest themselves. For example, a Christian can respect the freedom of a Jewish person to live authentically Jewish if those convictions arise authentically even while pleading with this person to accept the truths of Christianity.

The founder of Philadelphia, William Penn, named the city the "City of Brotherly Love" due to his conviction that religious liberty is an ethic grounded in the Golden Rule. He explicitly cites Matthew 7:12 in his argument.¹⁰¹ The Golden Rule of religious liberty practiced in the context of loving one's neighbor is a simple principle: If

¹⁰¹Peter A Lillback, "Pluralism, Postmodernity, and Religious Liberty: The Abiding Necessity of Free Speech and Religious Convictions in the Public Square," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 44, no. 1 (2009): 39.

an individual wants religious liberty for himself or herself, that person must be willing to extend the same liberty to others. This principle of self-constituting one's religious life is pivotal for persons to engage freely in society. If religious liberty is any social value at all, it must be a principle based on reciprocity and applicable to all persons without qualification.¹⁰² According to ethicist J. Daryl Charles, "religious freedom, issuing out of human dignity, benefits all members and segments of society—private and familial, public and social— and not merely those of religious conviction."¹⁰³ Charles's emphasis on human dignity is particularly important, since the image of God is the basis of religious liberty's inherent application to all persons. Religious liberty is therefore one critical juncture where the image of God and neighbor love form a critical nexus.¹⁰⁴ According to J. D. Hughey,

True concern for the welfare of others leads to religious liberty. The Golden Rule forbids the oppression of anyone for his religious beliefs or practices or the lack of them. If Christians want to be free in Moslem lands, they should grant freedom to Moslems in predominantly Christian countries. If Catholics or Protestants want freedom where they are in the minority, they ought to grant it where they are the majority. It is unethical, and therefore unchristian, to demand a right for oneself if one would not be willing under different circumstances to grant the same right to others.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰²According to Wood, "A Biblical View of Religious Liberty," 40, Nor is religious freedom simply the right of any one church to fulfil its own particular mission, while other faiths in the same state are denied that right. Espousal of religious freedom for one's own church, therefore, must also include the espousal of the right of all other churches and religious traditions. This means that freedom and human rights must be the concern of all religions everywhere.

¹⁰³Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law*, 56.

¹⁰⁴Wood, "A Biblical View of Religious Liberty," 40, makes yet another perceptive claim on the relationship between the image of God as the framework for loving one's neighbor in the context of religious liberty:

Because religious freedom is based on the inherent rights of man, it must be acknowledged as the right of *all* persons. Religious freedom necessarily presupposes the equality of all persons. While all persons are not created equal in their abilities, aptitudes, productivity, or worth to society, all persons are created equal in that all persons are created in the image of God and "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights."

¹⁰⁵Hughey, "The Theological Frame of Religious Liberty," 1367.

As Christian legal scholars Robert P. George and David French argue, religious liberty is the “legal corollary” to the Golden Rule.¹⁰⁶

Secondly, and distinct from the first principle of religious liberty as neighbor love, religious liberty as a priority of Christian social ethics advances the mission of the gospel by loving one’s neighbor toward the possibility of them receiving the gospel.¹⁰⁷ This goes beyond the practice of mere reciprocity by insisting that love itself is rooted in free responses. Thus, a person can only truly be loving their neighbor in an ultimate sense of Christian love in allowing for a free response to the gospel and not coercing an individual to belief nor penalizing them for false belief. In allowing other individuals religious liberty, individuals come to understand the uncoerced nature of Christian salvation. Religious liberty as neighbor love hinges upon the affirmation that one’s neighbor is made in the image of God.¹⁰⁸

Rebecca Mathis similarly argues that a Christian understanding of religious liberty is rooted in the very principle of Christian love:

Baptist advocacy to extend religious liberty to all people serves as a faithful response to God’s ethical standards. God reminds God’s people to treat aliens as citizens; in modern America this principle requires extension of equal religious freedom to all. Honoring the faith of another, whether a fellow citizen or foreigner, serves as a powerful act of godly love. God’s commands surpass mere toleration.

¹⁰⁶David French, *Episode 9: Robert P. George*, The Liberty Files, June 21, 2017.

¹⁰⁷William Penn made an argument for religious liberty on the basis of neighbor love. Lillback, “Pluralism, Postmodernity, and Religious Liberty,” 36.

¹⁰⁸Again, the comments of Wood, “A Biblical View of Religious Liberty,” 40, are instructive on the reciprocal basis of religious liberty:

The *imago Dei*, stamped upon every man, must be forthrightly affirmed by the Church as the basis for the sanctity and worth of every person. In this sense, all persons are indeed equal. The rights and privileges of no one person is any more sacred than the rights and privileges of another person. Religious freedom, if it is to be rooted in principle and properly understood in its biblical context, must be universally espoused by the Church for all mankind. To grant privileges to a particular church or religious community, while denying these privileges to other churches or religious communities, is a denial of religious freedom, no matter how limited this denial may be, and of the fundamental right upon which religious freedom is based. Discrimination based upon religion is a contradiction of religious freedom, which by its very nature is an equal and inalienable right of all members of the family of mankind.

Offering love to one's neighbor means offering friendship, radical hospitality, and the hope of Christ in every situation. To love as God loves requires extending grace and mercy to the unlovable, to the undeserving, and to the most despicable.¹⁰⁹

This principle of love is bound up, intricately, with religious liberty as fostering relational justice between the Christian and the non-Christian within a secular society. Schirmacher and Howell argue that a social commitment to peace accomplished by the principle of religious liberty means "Christian justice is not a justice that bestows privileges on Christians, but Christian justice is a human justice for all humans alike."¹¹⁰ H. R. Beckley sees Christian love as the foundation for religious liberty reciprocity: "Christian love that respects the freedom of others to exercise their moral capacities surely includes the freedom of Christians to live within and support a system of justice which does not enforce patterns that favour distinctly Christian ends."¹¹¹ A religious liberty reciprocity ethic is crucial to achieving religious liberty's full application throughout society.

Moral witness as Christian mission. Earlier in this chapter, it was argued that religious liberty assumes a doctrine of general revelation. There, it was argued that individuals must possess the cognitive faculties to understand concepts intrinsic to proclamation such as repentance and moral culpability. Underlying culpability is the reality of moral witness; that is, possessing an aptitude to discern moral truth from error. Moreover, the presence of Christian moral witness in society is common grace itself since Christian morality supplies society with needed reform for proper social ordering. Since

¹⁰⁹Rebecca C. Mathis, "The Roots of Religious Liberty in Scripture," *Sewanee Theological Review* 55, no. 4 (2012): 402.

¹¹⁰Schirmacher and Howell, "Freedom of Religion or Belief," 24. They continue, writing, "The state has to assure and the religious citizens have to help the state in this, that the 'competition' between religions and non-religious worldviews . . . is not carried out by violence or the pressure of bribery but is left to peaceful intellectual discussion."

¹¹¹Harlan R. Beckley, "A Christian Affirmation of Rawls's Idea of Justice as Fairness—Part II," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 237.

Christian morality is grounded in creation and re-affirmed in the gospel, the nature of Christian moral witness is to counterbalance the effects of a social order bent toward sin and ruin.¹¹²

The reality of moral witness assumes an outward posture. Christian faith is not mere abstraction, but is incarnational in the ethical demands it arouses. The reality of Christian moral witness in society raises important issues about the communication and translation of Christian social values in society as a part of advancing Christian mission. This means, by definition, that Christian moral witness will seek the liberty and freedom to give witness in diverse society in hopes that individuals will encounter the truth of Christianity and salvation in Jesus Christ.

Christian moral witness is not a mere proclamation of rules, but of standards of judgment that reflect the holiness of God. Intrinsic to personal evangelism is the reality of moral conviction and likewise, intrinsic to the responsibility of Christian moral witness in society is bearing witness to the moral demands of the kingdom. Carl Henry strikes an appropriate balance on the relationship between Christian moral witness and mission: “We must confront the world now with an ethic to make it tremble, and with a dynamic to give it hope.”¹¹³ The Christian enters the public square with the mindset of seeing Christian ethical commitments advanced as a part of Christianity’s movement and hoped-for success throughout society.

Moral argument and moral witness are thus necessary to advance Christian mission, and moral arguments presume the possibility of reasoned communication and intelligibility within an individual and social context. This means, fundamentally, that religious liberty becomes an important asset in moral appeals striking at the level of

¹¹²Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

¹¹³Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 60.

individual conscience. If general revelation makes possible the communication of Christian moral demands, religious liberty is central in giving the communication of these ethical criterion the possibility of movement and momentum.

On the social and political level, for Christians to attempt to proclaim the gospel in any environment, Christianity must understand the moral grammar of its context and how arguments are made. The possibility of moral persuasion means operating contextually. Common grace operates as a feature of general revelation that makes moral argument intelligible in a fallen world and which makes receipt of the gospel possible.

Colonial Baptist Roger Williams is helpful in addressing the coordination of Christian moral witness in a pluralistic setting. In his famous ship analogy, Williams likens the inherent diversity of society to a ship at sea where travelers come from diverse religious backgrounds.¹¹⁴ According to Williams, there are three rules that the ship must uphold: First, not forcing those of one religion to join the prayers of another religion; second, not suppressing the rights of other religions to worship in their own way; and three, understanding and mutually consenting to the authority of the ship's captain for the purpose of executing justice properly so that the ship may fulfill its purpose of reaching its destination. Only persons who disturb the safety and undermine the operation of the ship are worthy of punishment.

This famous illustration is designed to demonstrate how a diverse society can attain "civil cooperation" through "mutual obligation," a peace and solidarity pact amid religious and moral pluralism.¹¹⁵ According to Williams, a natural law ordered by God

¹¹⁴Roger Williams, "The Ship of State Letter, ca. January 1654/55," in *The Correspondence of Roger Williams: 1654 - 1682*, ed. Glenn W. LaFantasie (Hanover, NH: Brown University Press, 1988), 2:419-25.

¹¹⁵James Calvin Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams: Christian Conviction and Public Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 111.

exists that allows each religious adherent to ascertain the necessary moral and ethical requirements for social stability, if even minimally.¹¹⁶ This idea maps similarly to political theorists John Rawls's "overlapping consensus" framework that has subsequently dominated debate on the concept of moral discourse in pluralistic settings.¹¹⁷ If anything, Williams's illustration demonstrates that Christians inhabit a "shared moral space" with individuals unlike them in their claims of theological revelation, but like them in possessing moral aptitude.¹¹⁸ Individuals in the same moral space can uphold their "comprehensive doctrines" to the chagrin of Rawls, and yet live with shared recognition of the other's right to make similarly moral and religious liberty claims. The ability to live by one's comprehensive doctrines is part of his or her ability to make contestable claims to one another—not to "dominate" one another, but to lovingly persuade by way of moral discourse.¹¹⁹ Religious liberty thus helps solve the dilemma of how diverse individuals can peaceably coexist amid differing moral claims without nullifying the reality that individuals, as religious creatures, are poised to make religious arguments, and that

¹¹⁶Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams*, 93, continues, For Roger Williams, conscience represented the heart of that capacity all human beings share: to live together in community, to cooperate in moral ventures and civil institutions, and thus to fulfill the social nature inherent in their species. Williams went a step further, however, insisting that human beings share not only this capacity for shared morality but also an actual set of norms and values that are generally acknowledged as right and good. He assumed that a skeletal set of general moral norms existed that all persons ought to recognize as advantageous for the common good and consistent with a safe and productive public society. Though agreement on this common morality sometimes requires considerable public deliberation and is often complicated by the ever-present effects of sin, a limited number of general moral rights and wrongs are in fact recognized by all human beings. This minimal agreement offers a basis for further moral dialogue concerning more specific norms and particular ethical cases, enabling citizens of different backgrounds to debate the relevance, refinement, and application of the norms they hold in common to specific circumstances. Williams referred to the respect for and cultivation of this common morality as the practice of civility.

¹¹⁷For an explanation of Rawls's "overlapping consensus," see John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 133-72.

¹¹⁸Martha Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 362.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 361.

religious arguments are not inherently irrational or inapplicable to society since all persons possess, in the words of Williams, “civill and morall goodness.”¹²⁰ This sense of commonality is where religious liberty, general revelation, and a concept of contestability central to advancing Christian moral witness forge an intersection. According to James Davis, Williams is instructive for modernity because his approach to religious liberty as a component to civil peace assumed contestability:

The hope for public moral conversation depends on mutual exchange, openness to the criticism and interpretation of the other, and an effort at sharedness that may include the approximate “translation” of certain norms and values into language that conversation partners may understand, if not adopt.¹²¹

Statements like that above are “thick” descriptions of the sum and substance that religious liberty as a component of the church’s mission in society must adopt if any influence in society can be wielded thick.¹²² Christian mission cannot wall itself off. It must proactively engage with its surroundings. This question of translating religiously-motivated moral discourse intersects with the challenge posed by Rawlsian liberalism and “public reason,”¹²³ namely its settled rejection of allowing “comprehensive doctrines” into political discourse.¹²⁴ Were Rawlsian liberalism to have its way, the opportunity for Christian moral discourse in society, the type of moral discourse that calls forth repentance

¹²⁰Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, 246.

¹²¹Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams*, 122.

¹²²Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

¹²³*Public reason* refers to Rawls’s exhortation that in liberal societies, there be a “pursuit of a common ground on which people can stand despite deep ethical and religious differences.” Charles Larmore, “Public Reason,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Rawls*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 368. See also Micah Watson, “‘The Late Rawls’: What Is Public Reason?” in *John Rawls and Christian Social Engagement*, ed. Greg Forster and Anthony B. Bradley (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 29-45.

¹²⁴For a review of Rawlsian liberalism’s impact on religious discourse in society, see Johannes Van Der Ven, “The Religious Hermeneutics of Public Reasoning: From Paul to Rawls,” in *Rawls and Religion*, ed. Tom Bailey and Valentina Gentile (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 170-94; Peter Jonkers, “A Reasonable Faith? Pope Benedict’s Response to Rawls,” in *Rawls and Religion*; Robert Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

based on the moral demands of Christ's kingdom, would be rendered ineligible for participation, and by default, its mission critically hampered. A view toward advancing mission must confront the challenge of secularism's and liberalism's objections to religious discourse. This, in effect, is an issue of religious liberty, which entails the question: Ought Christians obey the demands of secularism and liberalism and renounce religious discourse and Christian moral argument in public debate? In the interest of furthering a vision of religious liberty that is true to the tenets of religious conviction, the answer should be no.

According to Beckley,

The freedom to agree to a public conception of justice does not prevent Christians (or others) from advocating their beliefs and accompanying way of life to other persons, individually or collectively, as long as they do not attempt to enforce that way of life through the basic structure of society.¹²⁵

Neither, however, does a commitment to moral argument on the grounds of shared moral consensus negate the possibility of distinctly Christian argument in the public square.

This raises an important point: How, in the paradigm explained here, does Christian moral discourse deliberate in the public square so that the work of mission can occur?

Matthew Franck makes the argument that attempts to ban religious arguments from moral debate in the public square fail to account for how religious arguments are actually made:

There is no compelling reason of principle for religious citizens to refrain from employing religious discourse in the public square. They must, of course, reason together with their fellow citizens in order to persuade others of their policy views. But if their major premises, so to speak, are theological, there is no harm done, so long as their policy conclusions can be reasonably embraced by others who have different commitments.

The attribution of a "strictly religious" motivation to a policy view offers an incomplete account of how people actually reason in political life. Beliefs that may be called "strictly" religious or theological typically supply only a major premise for a policy conclusion. The minor premise will usually be supplied by other considerations—of cost, of prudence or practicality, of justice to others, of forbearance toward those same others. Even "thou shalt not kill," for instance, is not a principle that *by itself* can lead straight to *anything* in public policy—not even a

¹²⁵Beckley, "A Christian Affirmation of Rawls's Idea," 235.

coherent homicide law—without intervening minor premises that will tell us when, how, and with regard to whom the principle will be applied.¹²⁶

Franck's comments are a helpful rebuttal to the claims of Rawlsian liberalism.¹²⁷

As a creature possessing a moral aptitude alongside his or her fellow citizens who may or may not accept religious presuppositions but are nonetheless still morally reasoning beings, the use of religious presuppositions in moral debate does not mean that an argument is futile or groundless or the arguments untrue. A religious argument for proving the Trinity in public debate is not the same type of argument, for example, for supporting or opposing capital punishment on religious grounds. An argument will strike at the level of reason and instinct in its persuasiveness regardless of whether the argument is religious in nature. Furthermore, the pursuit of neutrality and common ground says more about the person requiring debate on such grounds than it does about the merits of religiously-based argument. The claims of public reason or "neutrality" attaining a perfect common ground is as unattainable as it is unreasonable. According to Nicholas Wolterstorff, "No comprehensive vision—be it religious or not, be it of God and the good, or only of the good—no comprehensive vision can properly serve as the basis of public reason on fundamental political questions."¹²⁸ Wolterstorff's argument is that public reason itself is

¹²⁶Matthew J. Franck, "The Unreasonableness of Secular Public Reason," *Public Discourse*, August 28, 2015, accessed November 24, 2015, <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2015/08/14619/>.

¹²⁷For Christian rebuttals to Rawlsian liberalism, see Joseph M. Knippenberg, "Does 'Pluralism' Require Religion to Be Either Rationalized or Cast Out of Society?" in *John Rawls and Christian Social Engagement*, 105-20; Bryan T. McGraw, "Rawls and Culture War," in *John Rawls and Christian Social Engagement*, 165-78; Bryan T. McGraw, *Faith in Politics: Religion and Liberal Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Hunter Baker, "The Secular Biases of Rawls' 'Neutral Rules,'" in *John Rawls and Christian Social Engagement*, 91-103; Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us about Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons," in *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism*, ed. Paul J. Weithman (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1997), 162-81; William A. Galston, "Religious Pluralism and the Limits of Public Reason," in *The Naked Public Square Reconsidered: Religion and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Christopher Wolfe (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2009), 151-64; Michael Pakaluk, "Religion in a Liberal Democracy: Foundation or Threat?" in *The Naked Public Square Reconsidered*, 81-107; Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); Franck, "The Unreasonableness of Secular Public Reason."

¹²⁸Wolterstorff, "Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us," 171. Wolterstorff goes on to observe, "The contested fate of Rawls' own principles of justice is an illustrative case in point. There's no

an idealized view of society that does not reconcile with people's experiences in how moral conclusions are reached.¹²⁹ The requirement that moral debate occur within artificially-imposed and religiously sanitized constraints such as neutrality does not do justice to the moral deliberation of humans, whose reason is more often than not informed by the authority of transcendence and contexts that shape the moral imagination. What, then, comes of Christians making moral arguments in the public square? The duty of Christians becomes explaining in earnest the contours and contents of their beliefs and moral conclusions in hopes that one's interlocutor will be open to understanding, if not persuadable.

If anything, the call for Christian moral argument in the public square is not a call exclusively to natural law. It can never be less than appeals to natural law or reason, but it must be more as well if it is an ethic that is truly Christian. The backing of Christian moral witness in the public square must be grounded on an authority outside of mere reason, not because Christian morality is irrational, but because individuals are capable of responding to transcendence as much as they are to reason. According to Russell Moore, "In an age suspicious of all authority outside of the self, the appeal to a word that carries transcendent authority can be just distinctive and disruptive enough to be heard, even if not immediately embraced."¹³⁰ Moore is correct. According to the witness of the apostle Paul, every individual, even those who would call themselves atheist, recognize some aspect of transcendence, regardless of whether such transcendence is ever admitted (Rom 1:18-32). The task of Christian moral witness, strengthened by a liberty to bear such a

more hope that all those among us who are reasonable and rational will arrive, in the way Rawls recommends, at consensus on principles of justice, than what we will all, in the foreseeable future, agree on some comprehensive philosophical or religious doctrine." Wolterstorff, "Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us," 174.

¹²⁹Ibid., 179.

¹³⁰Russell Moore, "Can the Religious Right Be Saved?" *First Things* 269 (January 2017): 38.

witness, serves to advance Christian mission by opening society up to the realities of Christian truth. As James K. A. Smith writes, “The public task of the church is not just to remind the world of what it (allegedly) already knows (by “natural” reason) but to proclaim what it couldn’t otherwise know—and to do so as a public service for the sake of the common good.”¹³¹ Or as Oliver O’Donovan similarly writes, “God has no spies. He has prophets, and he commission them to speak about society in words with rebuke the inauthentic speech of false prophets.”¹³²

Thus, Christian social witness is under no obligation to surrender its message in order to play by the rules of liberal democracy. The state and society needs the comprehensive doctrines issuing from religious claims in order to prevent the state from enacting a perverse form of secular orthodoxy.¹³³

To engage in moral deliberation requires a two-fold task. First, the Christian must profess what he or she believes on any given matter. Secondly, there must be a commitment to explaining, as best as possible, the grounds of that belief and a means of translating how the religious grounds of an ethical conviction relate to the non-Christian. Christians can find great opportunity amid the openness of liberal democracy if they will only be so brave as to utilize the freedoms it currently provides. Christian accounts of modernity or liberal democracy that make it an enemy of Christianity fail to acknowledge Christianity’s own participation in society is an extension of its commitment to mission. Active participation in liberal democracy is not a surrender to sanitized notions of moral discourse. As citizens of a shared political order, a commitment to proclamation is a commitment to upholding the political order that makes proclamation possible, even if it

¹³¹James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 153.

¹³²Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11.

¹³³As Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 86, writes, “A perverse notion of disestablishment of religion leads to the establishment of the state as church.”

means, at times, transgressing the secular boundaries imposed by liberal democracy in order for liberal democracy to be the best version of itself. According to Richard John Neuhaus,

It means quite simply that the Church proclaims its message of salvation to all but that it also feels morally bound to uphold the consensus on which civilized public order is built. To endorse a shared loyalty which falls short of a Christian's loyalty to the gospel is not a betrayal and does not imply thinking of society in amoral, quasi-mechanical, terms as being driven by 'internal dynamics rather than led by moral purposes.' It is to deny only the kind of claims commonly made by upholders of the ideal of 'Christendom,' implicitly affirming a Christian duty to seek to shape society and political forms.¹³⁴

Social stability and tranquility as Christian mission. A nation that fosters religious liberty will be a nation open to religious proclamation practiced peaceably. Religious liberty is thus common grace because it allows religious difference in society to attain a minimal account of social harmony and tranquility. This social tranquility encompasses the ability of individuals to pursue the actions sustainable to human flourishing. A moral ecology of this nature will be one that can secure private space in which individuals can form friendships and families and voluntary associations. In these spheres, not in the sphere of political doings, individuals find the closest thing to true happiness available in this life—analogue to the form of association the redeemed enjoy in God's kingdom. Politics at its best makes room for such happiness and such associations. It also opens up the space in which individuals can pursue the spiritual life as they understand it.¹³⁵

Using Book 19 Chapter 17 of Augustine's *City of God* as a heuristic device, a Christian ethic of religious liberty as mission ought to take advantage of a nation's laws, where possible and advisable, in order to advance the mission of Christ.¹³⁶ As a tool of

¹³⁴Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 66.

¹³⁵Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 233-34.

¹³⁶For more on the political relevance of Augustine's Book 19, see Oliver O'Donovan,

Christian mission applied to society more broadly, religious liberty enhances social tranquility by fostering the conditions of social equality and justice. To this end, Book 19, Chapter 17 may be one of the important non-biblical documents for religious liberty.¹³⁷ The focus of chapter 17 is that which produces peace and discord between the City of God and the City of Man. Elements of the overall chapter comport with the overall understanding of religious liberty as Christian mission.¹³⁸

According to Augustine, the earthly city strives after a temporal earthly peace in order that humanity in society might prosper in itself, what Augustine calls an “ordered concord of civic obedience and rule in order to secure a kind of cooperation of men’s wills for the sake of things which belong to this moral life.”¹³⁹ Those belonging to the City of God likewise strive after an earthly peace as well, knowing their eternal hope is secured in Christ. The City of God makes use of the City of Man and its laws for its own benefit, a shared peace and tranquility, but for different ends.¹⁴⁰ This shared peace secures “a common sense of membership for Christian and unbeliever alike.”¹⁴¹ The secular state is not the “neutral state” but merely a peaceful state. Neutrality as a theological principle is untenable. When the City of God and the City of Man strive toward mutual peace, “a

“Augustine’s City of God XIX and Western Political Thought,” *Dionysius* 11 (December 1987): 89-110; Oliver O’Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 48-72.

¹³⁷Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. R. W. Dyson, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 945-47.

¹³⁸For more on the topic of Augustine and religious liberty, see John Rist, “Augustine and Religious Freedom,” in *Christianity and Freedom*, 1:103-22; Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West*, 45-56.

¹³⁹Augustine, *The City of God*, 945.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 946.

¹⁴¹Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society*, 171.

harmony is preserved between them” pertaining to the conditions of life in a fallen world.¹⁴²

Augustine then acknowledges that the City of Man is marked by great divergence as to religion. Crucially, he then observes that because of the diversity amid a penultimately secular era, “It has not been possible for the Heavenly City to have laws of religion in common with the earthly city.”¹⁴³ This is not to say that a nation’s laws are precluded from aligning with God’s moral law; rather, it is to acknowledge that the City of Man’s purpose in enacting law precludes it from prescribing laws directing humanity toward its ultimate religious end since government pronouncing what constitutes the religious end of humanity is outside its jurisdiction.

At times, the City of God must dissent from the gods of the City of Man, which may disturb the peace and provoke persecution. The City of God in Augustine’s framework continues to advocate for social harmony and prosperity to every length possible insofar as the laws do not “impede the religion by which we are taught that the one supreme and true God is to be worshipped.”¹⁴⁴ Here, Augustine upholds the importance of the City of God’s free exercise. The City of God upholds the worthwhileness of social tranquility in whatever its context, striving after earthly peace. But for what end is the earthly peace ordered?

Indeed, she directed that earthly peace toward heavenly peace: towards the peace which is so truly such that—at least so far as rational creatures are concerned—only it can really be held to be peace and called such. For this peace is perfectly ordered and perfectly harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God, and of one another in God.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴²Augustine, *The City of God*, 946.

¹⁴³Ibid.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 947.

¹⁴⁵Ibid.

According to Augustine, then, Christians make use of laws that benefit the mass of fallen society in order to facilitate humanity toward its ultimate end—fellowship with God. Augustine operates on two planes. He understands the integrity and purposefulness of earthly law for the prosperity and peace it offers inhabitants. Yet, a deeper motive undergirds Augustine’s appreciation for the stability of law; namely, that Christians leverage social harmony or social tranquility for eternal purpose. Despite Christians possessing the fullest truth of religion, Augustine believes earthly cooperation and the maintenance of civil order that law provides, should be stewarded toward humanity’s ultimate end: salvation.

Augustine’s view of social cooperation is purely instrumental. Christians take advantage of the contexts they are in, in order to advance that context and ecosystem towards redemption. This happens while occupying the same *saeculum*, or secular age. How so? According to Robert Markus, “For the citizen of the heavenly city, concern for the *saeculum* is the temporal dimension of his concern for the eternal city.”¹⁴⁶ This means, in effect, that Christians are to “recognize penultimate convergence even where there is ultimate divergence.”¹⁴⁷ Christians are to cooperate where possible, while recognizing that the loyalties of the City of Man and the City of God are at odds. An awareness of ultimate divergence does not cordon off the state and its policymakers from the claims of the gospel. While an entailment of this chapter means that governments should not be religiously confessional, that does not omit the reality that legislators and policy makers bring their own religious and ideological commitments to the task of governing that are far from neutral. According to Lesslie Newbigin, “it is the duty of the church to ask what those beliefs and commitments are and to expose them to the light of the gospel.”¹⁴⁸ The

¹⁴⁶Markus, *Saeculum*, 102.

¹⁴⁷Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 218.

¹⁴⁸Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 132.

reality that government is always occupied by persons who are accountable to God opens them up to the claims of the gospel. This, in turn, means that government leaders and legal systems are within the purview of Christian mission. Christian mission may avail success insofar as transformed consciences pass laws that are just and righteous (1 Kings 3:28). This can happen without formal “establishment” from occurring.

Furthermore, Augustine’s ethic is grounded in the reality of society being inherently social and driven toward the goal of accomplishing civil peace:

This peace the Heavenly City possesses in faith while on its pilgrimage, and by this faith it lives righteously, directing towards the attainment of that peace every good act which it performs either for God, or—since the city’s life is inevitably a social one—for neighbor.¹⁴⁹

How does Augustine’s reflection inform religious liberty as mission in society? First, Christians care about utilizing religious liberty for its ultimate opportunity for humanity’s salvation; while secondly, prioritizing it as an essential element for common life within the City of Man. Society is fractured, according to Augustine, but laws exist that provide for tranquility, and the ability for the church to capitalize upon these laws for divine purposes. In the view of Augustine, an eschatological division in both the era of time and who the people of God are does not inhibit, but actually animates, the activity of mission in society. Much like the prophet Jeremiah’s admonition to exiled Israelites to “seek the welfare of the city,” Augustine grounds participation in the social order on the basis of social order itself, yet with the possibility of the social order itself unwittingly participating in the mission of God by opening itself up to the gospel. The openness of society to religious truth means that “religion can remind us all of a good that encompasses and then transcends political life. Only religion can remind us that the temporal ultimately answers to the eternal.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹Augustine, *The City of God*, 947.

¹⁵⁰Franck, “Two Tales,” 23.

What does this mean for the possibility of Christian mission amid the political order? It does not mean triumphalism; nor does it mean nominal conceptions such as “Christendom.” Rather, the Christian church must take seriously the possibility that its mission may be successful and sizable influence possible. Even still, the church must be cognizant that political power is not its mission. The mission is witness and proclamation throughout every sphere. According to O’Donovan,

Christian political order is not a project of the church’s mission, either as an end in itself or as a means to the further missionary end. The church’s one project is to witness to the kingdom of God. Christendom is a response to mission, and as such a sign that God has blessed it. It is constituted not by the church’s seizing alien power; but by alien power’s being attentive to the church.¹⁵¹

All of this means that a Christian emphasis on religious liberty sees the liberty to engage in its mission as one mediated through public discourse and political debate “without threatening the autonomy of the secular.”¹⁵²

Conclusion

Religious liberty is a necessary component for the unhindered advance of the gospel. To be sure, the gospel finds fertile soil wherever the Spirit of God moves, even in authoritarian contexts. There is no virtue in seeking out persecution. If persecution comes, let it come, and let those who follow Christ receive it with honor (Acts 5). The reality of persecution does not excuse the benefits of religious freedom, nor does it nullify its urgency.

The gospel is never disconnected from the means through which the gospel advances. In 2 Corinthians, Paul’s declaration is clear: He is pleading for his audience to be reconciled with God (5:17-21). May that be the church’s declaration, too. When the church understands what is at stake in how the gospel is advanced, it should want to

¹⁵¹O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 195.

¹⁵²Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 69.

remove every obstacle that would stop it from making new disciples and new creations in Christ.

To believe one's convictions authentically without fear of reprisal, one needs a social context that views the conscience as an inviolable force for human fulfillment. To live out one's faith, one needs a social context that caters to religious freedom. To advance the gospel, one needs a social context that is not threatened by religion.

By understanding the relationship between the kingdom of God and the image of God properly, a truly Christian understanding of the mission of God culminates in a paradigm that sees religious liberty as a critical ingredient to the advance of human happiness, social tranquility, but supremely, of God's mission on earth.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: SECULARISM AND THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

One of the underlying currents to this dissertation is the necessity for transcendence to underwrite a principled concept of, and commitment to, religious liberty. The account advanced in this dissertation assumes a principled commitment to religious liberty would be unintelligible apart from its transcendent foundation in God's decretive plan for history, humanity, and redemption.

A concept of transcendence means that humanity is fallible in its ultimate judgments on religion because humanity lacks perfect knowledge to know which religion is ultimately true (eschatology). A concept of transcendence means that human dignity and freedom dwell inviolably in human nature because humanity is a creation of God—not the state—and this is true regardless of whether humanity's right to liberty is acknowledged by the governing authorities or civil society (anthropology). Lastly, a concept of transcendence means that humanity cannot save itself—that its deepest problems reside outside humanity's capacity to resolve; and that human longing to achieve redemption or *eudemonia* is central to human experience (soteriology).

One of the implications of this dissertation is that whenever and wherever adjudicating judgments on religious belief, human freedom, and how an individual understands ultimate redemption are placed within the domain of human authority, religious liberty's viability is precarious. This is due to the reality that discriminating judgments about a moral agent's understanding of ultimate reality, religion, and morality are not suited for fallible agents to determine on behalf of another, or to restrict or leverage

one's liberty on the basis of a held conviction without a high burden of proof of cause and nefarious effect being established.

To the extent that any secular ideology furnishes a secular form of eschatology, anthropology, and soteriological backdrop without an account of transcendence underwriting them, these ideologies will be deleterious on religious liberty. Without an account of transcendence and ultimate judgment, a lasting ecosystem of religious liberty is impossible to maintain. Once again, the categories of penultimate and ultimate come into play. Where ideologies confuse the penultimate for the ultimate, these ideologies will necessarily work to rectify or remove whatever impediments prohibit the ultimate from enactment.

Whenever an ideology or movement functions as an agent of absolute judgment over religious, moral, or ideological dissent in the present in order to further its own vision of political utopia or social justice, it engages in what is known as “immanentizing the eschaton.”¹ According to Eric Voegelin, who developed the idea, “The problem of an *eidos* in history, hence, arises only when a Christian transcendental fulfillment becomes immanentized. Such an immanentist hypostasis of the eschaton, however, is a theoretical fallacy.”² According to Voegelin, attempts to enact a state of perfect justice in an inherently imperfectible era will lead to disastrous outcomes. In this account, utopias are inimical to liberty because utopias bring about a sweeping eschatological and secular form of judgment. John Murray Cuddihy writes that these notions of the “perfect community” that are driven by an eschatological interpretation of history's fulfillment (i.e., “progress”), will not countenance civility.³ Whether they would countenance liberty is questionable,

¹This phrase was first used by philosopher Eric Voegelin.

²Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 120.

³John Murray Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York: The Seabury Press, a Crossroad Book, 1978), 108.

as well. Such is the result of what Richard John Neuhaus calls the “Naked Public Square,” one devoid of an adjudicating authority higher than the community itself.⁴

This understanding that culture always has some type of animating center driving it resonates with Henry Van Til’s famous maxim that “culture is simply the service of God in our lives; it is religion externalized.”⁵ Religion is that which becomes comprehensive and totalizing to a person’s existence. Whether there is a notion of “God” in this paradigm is irrelevant. Something God-like inevitably fills the vacuum left unoccupied by a notion of transcendence. According to Van Til, “Even Communism, like Nazism, has its gods and devils, its sin and salvation, its priests and its liturgies, its paradise of the stateless society of the future.”⁶

Bound up in this “politics of redemption” is an attempt by philosophers and activists to “direct their political prescription toward some future even of ultimate significance, trying to hasten its arrival by human action.”⁷ It explains the world and supplies ideological movements with a comprehensive account of justice devoid of any transcendent account, yet supplied with its own humanistic eschatology, anthropology, and soteriology. It explains why there is no principled commitment to give space to dissenting viewpoints.

If the present age is sufficient for approximating perfect justice and redressing all social ills, whatever fills the vacuum left by God’s absence thus functions in the role

⁴Richard John Neuhaus, “From Providence to Privacy: Religion and the Redefinition of America,” in *Unsecular America*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 63.

⁵Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), 200. For more on the relationship between religion and culture within the Reformed tradition, see Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, chap. 3

⁶*Ibid.*, 39.

⁷Glenn A. Moots, *Politics Reformed: The Anglo-American Legacy of Covenant Theology* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2010), 10. Moots condemns this vide of politics as incompatible with biblical politics: “In Christian theology, eschatology refers to the study of the last things and to heaven. But when understood in the traditional or Augustinian sense, these last things are not immanent such that any particular human act can accelerate their arrival. Humankind cannot bring heaven to earth.” *Ibid.*

of divine judge and divine mediator. Divine judgment is placed it in the hands of non-divine beings who attempt to execute judgment for the sake of justice in the present.

In a secularist rendering, if an account of the world disagrees with this worldview, why countenance it? If steps can be taken to eradicate the perceived social pathology in the present, why not take steps—perhaps even through the use of violence or suppression—to quash such what the majority considers an inappropriate dissent? If the present age is all there is in one’s secular horizon, and if the closest approximation to justice that can be known is mediated through a progressive eschatology of the present, why countenance an idea such as religious liberty or freedom of conscience if the liberty to hold and act on those ideas aggrieves an offended party? This conflict is why, ultimately, clashes over religious liberty are not battles of religious persons against non-religious persons. The debates around religious liberty are a competition between one religion, self-autonomy, and the religion of the Triune God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Jonathan Leeman correctly observes that the absence of divine judgment simply results with human judgment functioning in the same capacity:

When you remove the God of glory and the God of judgment who created all humanity in his image, this is where the story of freedom, rights, and equality culminates. I dare say, the American Experiment, divorced from God, makes same-sex marriage, transgender-bathroom debates, and the end of religious tolerance inevitable. Every person becomes his or her own god.⁸

This judgment happens by rejecting transcendence as a mediating source of authority altogether. Secular accounts of history that attempt to enact its vision of social justice or political utopia are immanentizing a preferred eschaton, and displacing transcendence with a secular account of history such that “a set of spiritual concerns,

⁸Jonathan Leeman, *How the Nations Rage: Rethinking Politics in a Divided Age* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 211. For a similar argument, see Michael Horton, “The Time Between: Redefining the ‘Secular’ in Contemporary Debate,” in *After Modernity? Secularity, Globalization, and the Re-Enchantment of the World*, ed. James K. A. Smith (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 45-65. See also Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 108.

once contained and channeled by churches, was set free to find new homes in our public conflicts.”⁹ So much of the secular fervency pronouncing judgment on the current era stems from Christian theological concepts related to judgment and salvation now translated for the purpose of illiberal causes:

Unconsciously held Christian ideas broken from the theology that gave them meaning, and it’s hungry for the identification of sinners—the better to prove the virtue of the accusers and, perhaps, especially, to demonstrate the sociopolitical power of the accusers.¹⁰

This concern over enacting a secularized form of quasi-religious judgment finds purchase in non-Christian view points as well. Commenting on Jewish intellectual Irving Kristol’s “greatest obsession,” Tom Wilson observes that secular liberalism’s gutting of transcendence leads, ultimately, into authoritarianism hostile to human and religious liberty:

The belief that secular liberalism breeds a valueless individualism that necessarily progresses toward moral disorder and even nihilism. Kristol feared that without religion, society would witness a growing discontent with what democratic capitalism can realistically provide. Stripped of any belief in the kind of higher consolation that makes sense of life’s inevitable injustices and humdrum frustrations, the demands that people place on the political system “become as infinite as the infinity they have lost.” Eventually the democratic regime is no longer able to justify or defend itself against the expectations of a citizenry that experiences no spiritual nourishment. Indeed, those expectations become unappeasable in the limitless material improvement that they insist government must provide and that capitalism promises. Without a religious culture, the slide into statism, if not authoritarianism, seems to become irresistible.¹¹

Kristol’s concerns are prescient and demonstrate why a society built merely upon reason will not persist with maximal liberty in the long run with these types of philosophical social movements at the helm. With humanity at the center and the question of God’s authority rejected from common understanding,

⁹Joseph Bottum, “The Spiritual Shape of Political Ideas,” *The Weekly Standard*, December 1, 2014, 21.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹Tom Wilson, “Irving Kristol’s God,” *First Things* 251 (March 2015): 21.

Modernity inherited Christian introspection but lost/rejected the God encountered in this interiority. Therefore new (transcendent) expectations are thrown on society/government, the result which is despair, since modernity inherits the Christian burden to “judge for yourself” without the good news of God’s judgment in Christ. Hence we spiral into self-conscious despair and cling ever more tenaciously to “secular” institutions—that is, institutions that are passing away and cannot save us.¹²

Reasoning beings require debate and inquiry, which progressive social canons cannot countenance if ultimate redress to social wrongs can be achieved in the present. In essence, ideologies fall prey to what they always fall prey to—exchanging the penultimate for the ultimate. The Christian American founder John Witherspoon made a similar observation, noting that opposition to civil liberty will lead, inevitably, to the decline of religious liberty:

The knowledge of God and his truths have from the beginning of the world been chiefly, if not entirely, confined to those parts of the earth, where some degree of liberty and political justice were to be seen, and great were the difficulties with which they had to struggle from the imperfection of human society, and the unjust decisions of usurped authority. There is not a single instance in history in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire. If therefore we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience into bondage.¹³

According to Witherspoon, something inheres within the transcendence that makes other forms of liberty possible. This is not coincidental. As this dissertation has argued, a transcendental foundation to religious liberty prevents non-divine agents from presuming divine agency. On these grounds, and in contrast to secular ideologies, a Christian doctrine of religious liberty emerges. By putting absolute judgment within the realm of the ultimate—not the penultimate—Christians can make room for dissenting belief. Not because Christianity thinks such dissenting belief shares equal merit, but because Christianity believes that judging, ending, and redressing all wrong belief cannot be achieved fully either in present form or in human hands. That is reserved exclusively

¹²James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 23. See also Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgement (Bampton Lectures)* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 309-12.

¹³John Witherspoon, “Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men” (sermon, Princeton, NJ, 1776), accessed July 6, 2017, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/1776-witherspoon-dominion-of-providence-over-the-passions-of-men-sermon>.

for God's Son, Jesus Christ, and the kingdom he's inaugurated, but that awaits consummation. By looking to the kingdom, Christians know where the arc of history bends and where erring ideologies will be sorted. Christians can allow the erring ideologies of the present to contest and to contend with the claims of Christ because Christianity's patience is based upon its Christ's promise of perfect justice. The future for religious liberty, then, is a battle of competing eschatologies.

This means inherent to Christianity is the rejection of totalized or absolutized visions for social order itself. This does not mean, however, that a social order is impenetrably cordoned off from religious influence. Whether secular liberalism, Nazism, Communism, or any other ideology, their attempt at a comprehensive vision for society is, at its most base, an eschatological heresy. Drawing on themes from Augustine, Robert Markus argues that Christianity, at root, rejects wholesale the temptation to absolutize politics or social movements within in the current era:

The human urge for a total and unified response must be seen as an eschatological objective, not to be anticipated in the present world of politics. Christian hope deflates all ideologies and utopias: in their place it sets provisional goals, to be realized piecemeal, and to be kept flexible and perpetually subject to revision and renewal in the light of political experiences seen in an eschatological perspective. It resists political programmes, which seem to make an ultimate claim on men.¹⁴

In this vein, Christian social responsibility entails discerning the lineaments of any ideology or movement that possesses totalizing tendencies. As Markus writes, "Christian hope, just because it is eschatological, resists the investing of immediate projects, policies and even social ideals, with any absolute character."¹⁵ Desacralizing any movement, ideology, and political structure may be one of the most urgent and prophetic tasks for the church in society. Like Bonhoeffer suggests, "Does one not in some cases, by remaining

¹⁴Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 171-72.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 173.

deliberately in the penultimate, perhaps point all the more genuinely to the ultimate, which God will speak in his own time?”¹⁶

By not immanentizing the eschaton and attempting to bring history’s future judgment into the present, Christians can extend a maximal account of liberty to their unbelieving neighbors with whom they disagree about very serious matters.

One of the more important postures for Christians to develop in a culture that rejects divine judgment, but nonetheless settles on judgment according to its own standards, is to reassert the primacy of eschatological judgment in its religious pronouncements. Indeed, John the Baptist’s own prophetic forewarning of Jesus’s reign must become the posture of the church toward a society that would erringly believe in its own infallibility: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2). Only for a culture made aware of its fickleness and error will the reality of future judgment pose an adequate rival. As Mouw and Griffioen argue, a “theocentric position treats all our human points of view as ultimately accountable to divine authority” and erroneous ideologies and religions “will not be treated kindly in the coming Judgment.”¹⁷

Summary of Arguments

The preceding chapters have attempted to accomplish one major task: To systematize arguments for religious liberty under the umbrella of biblical theology, specifically eschatology, anthropology, and soteriology. On the one hand, this dissertation sought to organize pre-existing arguments for religious liberty, while also adding new insights into the Christotelic purposes of religious liberty; namely, that Jesus Christ possesses sovereign, exclusive right to judge consciences. On the other hand, it has sought to accomplish a feat not previously observed—developing a constructive framework for

¹⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 6:84.

¹⁷Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 109.

an evangelical consensus around religious liberty that goes beyond arguments that mere commitments to theism or constitutionalism would countenance. A Muslim defense of religious liberty is not a Christian defense of religious liberty. A concern for free exercise jurisprudence can be answered apart from the question of Jesus Christ's lordship. If those last two sentences are true, then more work is needed in answering why Christians must prioritize religious liberty. It is the duty, then, of Christians to formulate an authentically Christian approach to religious liberty. Thus, while a Christian ethic of religious liberty will have shared components that non-Christians would agree with, for it to be Christian, it must be grounded, ultimately, in a locus centered on Jesus Christ and the drama of his coming kingdom.

Chapter 1 introduced the purpose of this dissertation by drawing attention to the anemic reality of evangelical scholarship surrounding religious liberty. Recognizing that "religious liberty" is nowhere explicitly stated in the Bible, chapter 1 argued that themes constitutive of religious liberty do exist in the Bible that provide the necessary components to develop a Christian framework for religious liberty. Chapter 1 provided the thesis of the dissertation: An evangelical approach to religious liberty is centrally concerned with recognizing Jesus' kingship over the conscience and his absolute and exclusive right to execute judgment over it; and this appropriation of religious liberty is best understood when built upon the foundational biblical motifs of the kingdom of God, the image of God, and the mission of God. The reality of Christ's sovereign, advancing kingship is the ground for which religious liberty ought to be intelligible for evangelicals. Chapter 1 also provided the background of the dissertation as well as the methodology relying on J. Budziszewski's "orienting doctrine," "practical doctrine," and "cultural apologetic." In demonstration of the current state of evangelical thinking on religious liberty, it offered a brief overview of various proposals for grounding religious liberty. Lastly, it established that an evangelical framework for religious liberty requires biblical and theological warrant; as well as a need to anchor religious liberty in eschatology and

to forge a paradigm that is not primarily anthropocentric in nature. Chapter 1 provided the outline and overview of the dissertation's primary chapters.

Chapter 2 argued that the kingdom of God provides the orienting framework for an evangelical account of religious liberty. By grounding religious liberty in eschatology, chapter 2 demonstrated that the future judgment of Jesus Christ's coming kingdom affords him the sole, exclusive right to judge the conscience. Chapter 2 positioned religious liberty as an interim ethic enjoyed by persons whose consciences await judgment. In the intervening period of time between the resurrection and second coming of Christ, individuals enjoy religious liberty and Christians should expect religious diversity and contestability between competing religions. The intervening period is also a "secular" era where individuals possess a penultimate right to religious liberty. In this era, government does not possess the authority or competence to adjudicate theological affairs or the consciences of religious persons. Chapter 2 also explored how themes related to sovereignty, justification, the nature of saving faith, and ecclesiology posit a doctrine of religious liberty.

Chapter 3 argued that the image of God in humanity grounds a practical doctrine of religious liberty for all persons. This chapter explored the portrait of humanity in Scripture as an inherently religious creature possessed with a moral agency that drives them toward experiences with transcendence. As image bearers of God, God designed persons as rationally free agents possessed with consciences that desire self-constitution. Chapter 3 also argued that freedom's true purpose is to find freedom in Jesus Christ, and thus, freedom is not simply a generic commodity to enjoy at will, but in hopes that persons would respond to the truth of the gospel and experience the liberation it promises (2 Cor 3:17). This chapter also advanced the thesis that the image of God is the foundation for a doctrine of human rights and that religious liberty is a constitutive part of a person's rights. It concluded by demonstrating that universal experiences and longings for adoration, authenticity, and authority demonstrate the need for individuals to experience freedom.

Chapter 4 advanced the argument that soteriological urgency undergirds the missional priority behind religious liberty. Chapter 4 demonstrated how the mission of God relies upon religious liberty for its advance. As a missionary faith, Christianity desires to take advantage of every freedom as its disposal to advance its message and see individuals experience redemption in Christ. In the context of mission and soteriology, religious liberty is a vehicle that helps accomplish eschatological judgment and eschatological blessing. It also argued that evangelism relies upon notions of religious liberty for its success while also demonstrating that religious liberty is critical to the integrity of ecclesiology. Chapter 4 concluded by showing how religious liberty helps position Christians within the public square for advancing Christian mission. As normative realities, pluralism and contestability are the church's mission field. Lastly, the chapter argued that Christian preoccupation with religious liberty benefits the common good and is evidence of God's common grace because it enables social tranquility to occur among diverse peoples. Religious liberty is thus an example of Christian moral witness in society. Thus, in striving for an environment where religious liberty is ennobled, the church serves its own mission in society by making possible the spread of the gospel.

Chapter 5 looked at whether secular ideologies possess sufficient explanatory power within themselves to offer religious liberty to differing views within society. It was argued that transcendence is foundational to a principled doctrine of religious liberty. Moreover, where ideologies come to power that reject transcendence, chapter 5 argued that attempts to "immanentize the eschaton" will lead to religious liberty's decline. Chapter 5 concluded by mentioning areas for further research connected to the dissertation's overall thesis.

Areas for Further Research

First, proposals that explains in detail what a specific church-state relationship model would look like that issues from this dissertation's argument would help flesh out a model for government that is non-confessional, while at the same time openly

welcoming to religious diversity and allowing of citizens and legislators to make moral decisions informed by religious belief.¹⁸ For example, while an establishment model of church-state relationship is surely prohibited, what would a hypothetical government that adopts the theory of this dissertation do with calls for the elimination of public schools and the government-funding of religious and non-religious public schools? Would the government providing vouchers for children to attend a religious school be an inappropriate blurring of jurisdictional lines?

Second, were more space available, additional research on the intersection of this dissertation with Rawlsian public reason would be merited. While this dissertation adopted a critical posture toward Rawlsian rejection of comprehensive doctrines, ideas such as “overlapping consensus” map somewhat nicely with areas of this dissertation that urge Christians to find common ground and common argument with non-Christians.¹⁹ Further exploration to determine additional areas of disagreement and agreement seem appropriate.

Third, as a chastened proponent of natural law theory and natural law ethics, I would be interested to see to what posture natural law proponents, particularly Catholic ones, would adopt toward this dissertation, since this dissertation argues for the legitimacy of religious liberty and the freedom of conscience on penultimate grounds, but not ultimate grounds.

Fourth, interaction with theonomic proposals would be interesting in order to juxtapose a Baptist account of religious liberty next to proposals that advocate for some type of national confessionalism.

¹⁸For a representative example of mapping a church-state continuum, see Rex Ahdar and Ian Leigh, *Religious Freedom in the Liberal State*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 89.

¹⁹For more on this topic, see Martha Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); James Calvin Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams: Christian Conviction and Public Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

Conclusion

On a cold, rainy Friday night in October 2017, my wife and I and a few friends from church gathered for a night of worship sponsored by a Christian worship organization that works with local Christian artists in our town.

At the end of the evening, the individual emceeding the night closed with an impassioned prayer wherein he expressed gratitude to God for the liberty to join together with other believers to worship Christ without fear of government harassment. There was palpable gratitude for the freedom to worship in this man's voice.

This gathering did not have to be registered with the government, which is tragically the case in other countries. We entered and left in peace without even a hint of fear of whether we would be “exposed” as Christians. Upon leaving, I knew I would be free to utilize social media and share of the event's details without fear of that post facing censorship. Moreover, that weekend, I would be free to go to church and hear a sermon on why Christians should seek to influence their culture, whether related to the sanctity of life, racial reconciliation, or any other issue of ethical controversy in the culture. While I am accustomed to sermons and prayers where gratitude to worship freely is often expressed, writing this dissertation while hearing a prayer to God giving him praise for religious liberty struck me anew; and it dawned on me that this dissertation was not just a rote academic exercise.

Something pivotal about my existence as a Christian, and my participation in a local body, is bound up with the liberty to live faithfully in accord with God's call on my life, and my family's life. Religious liberty is not the gospel. That night, however, I was reminded that my experience of the gospel assumes a freedom I so often ignore and at worst, neglect gratitude. Religious liberty fans the flames of personal holiness and proclamation. It gives breath to the life of a local congregation gathering together every Sunday to declare that Jesus Christ is king.

I was reminded and convicted that night of how trite, routine, and assumed religious liberty is in my own mind—that as an American, I know nothing other than

religious liberty. That is one of the challenges to religious liberty in an American context—that Americans grow so accustomed to it that they may not recognize when its pillars are slowly corroding.

But why this dissertation? Because the task of Christian scholarship includes both retrieval and proclamation. Christian reflection on religious liberty is as old as Christianity itself. But unless it is rehearsed and given fresh expression and articulation in new contexts, it can fall by the wayside. Marx was believed to have said, “Take away a people’s roots, and they can easily be moved.”²⁰ This dissertation has been an exercise in exposing the roots of freedom found in Christianity. Christians need presented with arguments for the defense of their own liberty, but also the liberty of others—for securing the liberty of others ensures the security of our own. This need for ethical apologetics is true of every age.

At this writing, religious liberty in America is entering a new age beset with challenges and opposition that call into question a once sacred consensus. In chapter 1 of this dissertation, I wrote that my motivation in writing a dissertation on religious liberty was to see this precious idea’s mantle taken up anew. By grounding religious liberty in the horizons of eschatology, anthropology, and soteriology, my hope is that this contribution to the field of Christian social ethics can be but one resource helping to usher in a new era of Christian preoccupation with religious liberty.

May the Christian church return to its first love, a primal strength—a fortitude that turns the other cheek and confidently, under pressure, insist that no worldly scheme can push back the onward advance of Christ’s invasion—for Christianity needs neither the state nor the culture for its truthfulness and efficacy. The liberty Christians seek and

²⁰Quoted in Peter A. Lillback, “Pluralism, Postmodernity, and Religious Liberty: The Abiding Necessity of Free Speech and Religious Convictions in the Public Square,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 44, no. 1 (2009): 53.

the liberty Christians use is a liberty to seek a city that is not yet, and to allow those in the church's midst to join it in the promise of its coming.

Any claim or pursuit of religious liberty must always be pointed back toward its telos: The advancement of God's kingdom. In the spirit of our missionary faith, let each of us, like the Apostle Paul, go about "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:31).

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ABSTRACT

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL SOCIAL ETHICS: AN ASSESSMENT AND FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL CHALLENGES

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Based on a review of the academic literature, evangelical public theology often lacks a systematic, theologically grounded social ethic concerning religious liberty. The resulting impasse is one where religious liberty lacks distinctly evangelical contours. Modern and contemporary religious liberty discussions have been ceded, almost exclusively, to political and legal philosophy. At the same time, religious liberty is a foundational principle for evangelical public theology because it addresses issues of how evangelicals enter the public square as a religious people. Additionally, a doctrine of religious liberty is vital for establishing the relationship between the church and state in society. Theological warrant is needed to establish a doctrine of religious liberty on evangelical grounds, and, correspondingly, the lack of consensus or framework around religious liberty jeopardizes the possibility of developing a truly evangelical understanding of religious liberty for public theology.

This dissertation seeks to remedy this gap in evangelical public theology and social ethics by grounding religious liberty in the biblical categories of eschatology, anthropology, and soteriology. Chapter one examines the literature surrounding evangelical proposals around religious liberty. Chapters 2 through 4 offer a constructive proposal for religious liberty oriented around the themes of the kingdom of God (eschatology), the image of God (anthropology), and the mission of God (soteriology). Chapter 5 concludes

by offering concern that secular ideologies lack sufficient explanatory power to extend a principled account of religious liberty.

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