houses. However, they do not provide a complete picture. The flawed superior was likely to be revealed, while the more scrupulous often remained hidden. The contrast between two stereotypical abbesses emerges in chapter seven, 'Shifting perspectives'. Spear compares the life of the virtuous, thirteenth-century female superior Euphemia to that of Eglentyne, the worldly, late fourteenth-century prioress in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. This comparison reveals that, while there were certainly worldly superiors in England, the fact that many wills sought the prayers and intercessions of the nuns suggests that confidence in the spiritual status of the convents did not wane. Therefore, the picture of steady decline in piety and respect of the female superior as exemplified in Chaucer's Eglentyne is successfully challenged by Spear. The final chapter is devoted to the reaction of female superiors to the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536. The reaction to the Dissolution was varied: some superiors attempted to shore up their financial positions, often in unconventional ways, while others relinquished their houses with little protest. The case of Elizabeth Shelly, abbess of St Mary's, Winchester, demonstrates that some superiors continued to live with small groups of their sisters even after the suppression of their houses, whereas other nuns moved abroad: Elizabeth Woodford from Burnham in Buckinghamshire left England to rejoin her community in Louvain (p 185).

This book is most appropriate for a specialist audience and is a significant contribution to the study of female monastic leadership in the middle ages. The glossary of terms at the beginning of the book is very helpful. Moreover, the appendices at the end are arranged for easy access and reference. Finally, the charts on pages 12–13 provide an interesting look at the network of power relationships between female superiors and their ecclesiastical and secular counterparts. This is an extremely well-researched book and the information is presented in an interesting and clear way. In fact, I am hard pressed to find fault with it. This research significantly adds to the understanding of female religious leadership in England during the middle ages, and I certainly look forward to reading more from Valerie Spear in the future.

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doi: 10.1017/S0956618X07000208

Religious Freedom in the Liberal State

Rex Ahdar and Ian Leigh

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, xxxvi + 410 pp (hardback £60.00)
ISBN 0-19-925362-5

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956618X07000208 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In a relatively small but growing body of literature, academic lawyers have written on religion and law from a variety of perspectives, sometimes with an appearance of neutrality and sometimes not. Rex Ahdar from the University of Otago and Ian Leigh from the University of Durham are pentecostal and evangelical Anglican respectively, and explicitly adopt an evangelical Christian approach. One of their main themes is that contemporary liberalism presents only a mirage of perfect neutrality. There is something of an irony here, as they observe. In the history of western thought, religion provided the moral and cultural underpinnings for a liberal society; however, in the contemporary world, many liberal societies have taken a secularist turn and religious freedom has found itself under increasing pressure, even as religious pluralism has flourished and the influence of Islam has spread.

Before addressing the pressure points directly, the authors explore the clash of ideas. Acknowledging that intolerance and suppression of other faiths prevailed for most of the Christian era, they observe that Christian thought has belatedly come round to the notion that the principle of religious liberty is right. They demonstrate the point by deriving eight overlapping convictions (such as the voluntariness of faith, the ecumenical principle, and the need for unrestricted conscience) that are conducive to that acceptance. In another chapter, they add to the extensive literature on the elusive concept of liberalism: sensibly, they are mainly concerned to elucidate some of its salient features and to draw out some of their implications.

In the second part of the book, the authors turn to constitutional and institutional perspectives on what protection of religious liberty involves. In one chapter, there is a discussion of different models of relations between religion and state, with types loosely located along a continuum that runs from theocracy to a mode of separation that is not merely neutral but is hostile to religion. Such concepts as 'establishment', 'neutrality' and 'separation' are each apt to comprise a variety of constitutional arrangements, even without the authors' important caveat that 'the *de jure* relationship between religion and state may not necessarily coincide with the *de facto* connection' (p 68). Whether a state can have an establishment of religion and also have religious liberty is a question perhaps especially prompted by discourse in the United States, where the two clauses found in the First Amendment sometimes seem to be in tension. However, the authors argue persuasively that establishment, at least in its milder forms, is quite compatible with religious freedom.

In another chapter, the nature of religious freedom, and its recognition in some constitutions and in international law, is examined. In passing, the difficulties of defining religion are traversed again. It is noted that the broad formulation of 'freedom of thought, conscience and religion' found in the European Convention on Human Rights sometimes enables the problem to be skirted, but the authors are critical of the Strasbourg Court's failure to define terms.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956618X07000208 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It might also be noted that the technique of recent legislation in Britain has been deliberately to avoid definition. In an interesting and key chapter, the authors stake out a position on what limits to religious freedom are acceptable. When clashes arise between religious practice and law or between religious freedom and other rights or freedoms, some kind of balancing is needed. The authors propose a three-stage approach, which involves an applicant stating the claim, the state testing the claim, and a weighing of the claim, with the burden on the state to justify the necessity of denying a religious exemption in the terms adopted.

The theoretical discussions and the formula for assessing limits to religious freedom provide the background for the third part of the book, in which there are six chapters covering particular topics: families, parents and children; education; medical treatment; employment; religious group autonomy; and religious expression. Here, there is often a sharpening of the issues by presentation of contrasting liberal and religious approaches, although the varieties of liberalism and the plurality of religions sometimes conspire to blunt the impact of these supposed antitheses. If the authors are explicit about their religious beliefs, some of their political convictions are implicit in their acceptance of the premise that 'liberalism is the principal philosophical foundation for law in modern democracy' (p 38), and indeed reconciliation often seems to be the aim. That said, there are conclusions on matters such as parents' corporal punishment of children, faith schools and religious education, which will not persuade some sceptical liberals.

The chapter on education is perhaps one of the weaker ones, with its argument depending on some questionable inferences from statistics. The chapters on family matters and medical treatment are competently handled, and the chapter on employment has some very useful and careful analysis of the recent regulations aimed at preventing religious discrimination in employment. The chapters on religious group autonomy and on religious expression are especially rewarding, with interesting discussions of the treatment of religion in broadcasting and of judicial evaluations of religious speech, for example.

If there is a slight systemic fault, it is perhaps that the organising principle of the book, with its emphasis on freedom, may at times give insufficient attention or weight to societal values and choices. However, there is no doubt that the book has very substantial merits. The authors are meticulous as legal scholars, but also impressively proficient in political philosophy and theology, amongst other disciplines. Their accomplished text will deservedly appear at the top of many reading lists in the next few years.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956618X07000208 Published online by Cambridge University Press