

Has liberalism run its course?

Review by Paul Lusk published in *Evangelicals Now*, May 2020

Liberalism's Religion

Cécile Laborde

Harvard University Press

344 pp

£28.95

ISBN 9780674976269

Christians today are anxious about freedom in 'post-Christian' society. So when public venues are closed to evangelists who oppose same-sex marriage, we are urged to support expensive legal cases to test the boundaries of religious liberty. But, below the surface, we differ on the principles underlying our defence of freedom. A liberal society protects the equal rights of all to free expression, but how should it respond when competing groups apparently demand each another's rights to be curtailed? Some Christians think that liberalism has run its course – as 'post-liberals' (or maybe 'never-liberals') they want a new cultural settlement re-establishing Christianity in a protected space in the public square. Others dispute that such a solution is feasible or true to our faith. In my 2017 book, *The Jesus Candidate*, I argued that Christians should defend secular liberalism, including a state that is neutral in matters of religion.

Into this space arrives a brilliant study by a liberal political philosopher. Cécile Laborde (who is French, and an Oxford professor) starts with a familiar debate in liberal political theory – what is the proper boundary between politics (and the role of the state) and religion (and the role of the church)? Liberal states protect 'religious liberty' but what is 'religion'? Liberalism defines religion in terms of 'belief' but what religious people really *do* is not just 'believe' but follow a set of cultural practices based around a shared identity. The problem is not really about protecting people's freedom to 'believe' or disbelieve, rather about how the state should set the boundaries between the rights of associations to be themselves, and the rights of the wider society to maintain its identity as a body of citizens. 'Neutrality' is unhelpful. What we need, she says, is 'minimal secularism.' The reason the state should be secular is so that citizens *do not* have to be secular. The state must apply 'public reason'

accessible to all citizens to understand – associations do not. She reduces this to two key issues – coherence and competence. Associations have a right to maintain their own coherence. They are competent to make decisions about belief and practice to protect that coherence. The state (applying public reason) is not. But the state has a duty to protect the coherence of wider society. The question of religious freedom is really about how we decide what matters are properly subject to public reason – to thinking and analysis that is available to all – and what are properly matters for the competence of associations.

In Christian terms, I think Laborde explores the boundary in society between matters we expect only believers to understand - because we hear the voice of Jesus, and others do not (John 18.37) - and matters where we defer to the judgment of the state (Romans 13). This is not a fixed line. Where we stand today is merely a moment in a conversation.

I think Laborde has written an important book. Reading it has changed my mind!