

Brian Bird, “The struggle for toleration.” Lecture delivered to Graduate and Faculty Christian Forum (GFCF) at UBC, Nov. 18 2021.

Abstract

In many liberal democracies, there has been a tectonic shift in how we handle ideological conflict. Whereas the starting point was once a robust form of tolerance (live and let live), this principle is now fading. Tolerance, once widely regarded as an essential element of free and democratic societies, has become suspect. It is much easier to exhibit tolerance when we agree with each other. But we must also do the same—perhaps especially—when we disagree. If a grassroots rediscovery of tolerance does not occur, and tolerance fades further from view, our society will inevitably gravitate closer to the so-called tyranny of the majority, or at least the tyranny of an intolerant minority within the majority. Such a state of affairs is antithetical to the essence of liberal democracy. It also runs the risk of creating a vicious cycle: in which today’s tyrannized minority will be tempted to become tomorrow’s tyrannizing majority. Human nature, we can agree, is flawed. We do well to avoid inviting such human frailties to take centre stage in today’s culture.

Biography

Brian Bird is an Assistant Professor at the Peter A. Allard School of Law at the University of British Columbia. Before joining Allard Law, he was a postdoctoral research fellow at Princeton University in the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions. He clerked for judges of the Supreme Court of British Columbia and for Justice Andromache Karakatsanis at the Supreme Court of Canada. Brian completed his doctorate at McGill University on The Freedom of Conscience and holds degrees from Oxford, University of Victoria, and Simon Fraser University. Brian’s academic writing has appeared in venues such as the Dalhousie Law Journal, Cambridge Law Review, Alberta Law Review, Supreme Court Law Review, and Manitoba Law Journal. He is co-editor of *The Forgotten Fundamental Freedoms of the Charter* (2020, LexisNexis Canada). His primary research interests are constitutional law and theory, interactions between courts and legislatures, jurisprudence, philosophy of law, legal history, and bills of rights.