



# Cornerstone Forum

*A Conversation on Religious Freedom  
and Its Social Implications*

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## Introduction: Intervening in a Public Debate (Excerpt)

Daniel Philpott  
Senior Associate Scholar, Religious Freedom Institute

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This is the second of a series of nine posts that previews one chapter of the new book by Daniel Philpott, [\*Religious Freedom in Islam: The Fate of a Universal Human Right in the Muslim World Today\*](#). What follows is an edited excerpt from the book.

To read all posts in this series visit: [Previewing \*Religious Freedom in Islam\* by Daniel Philpott](#)

My new book, [\*Religious Freedom in Islam: The Fate of a Universal Human Right in the Muslim World Today\*](#), assesses the West's culture war over Islam through the criterion of religious freedom. The problem is that religious freedom itself has been the subject of a public contretemps in recent years. This controversy is of recent vintage and beset with amnesia. Until yesterday, the populations of developed democracies considered religious freedom to be one of the nonnegotiable principles that ground constitutional liberal democracy. As President Obama pointed out in his speech addressed to the Muslim world in Cairo in 2009, citizens of the United States in particular have taken pride in their country's history as a pioneer and upholder of religious freedom.

Like the granite faces in Mt. Rushmore, religious freedom has been fixed in what it means to be American. Right and left, Americans have taken pride in being a home for religious people who have been persecuted or rejected elsewhere: Mennonites, Mormons, Muslims, Baptists, Jews, Huguenots, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Amish, Quakers, Seventh-Day Adventists, Scientologists, and even atheists. Americans regard the First Amendment to their Constitution as globally innovative and worthy of export and imitation. As recently as the 1990s, religious freedom's prestige among Americans was evidenced by two bills that the US Congress passed with overwhelming bipartisan majorities: the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 and the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

In recent years, though, even in the United States, religious freedom has come to appear less like a common heritage and more like one side of a culture war. Partisans of religious freedom vie against critics who view the principle as a mask for resisting progress, usually in matters of sexuality. A phalanx of intellectuals has taken up an argument against the principle *tout court*. Some ask what is so special about religious freedom that it merits a constitutional right of its own and call for it to be discontinued and folded into other freedoms like speech, assembly, and expression. Others cast their skepticism globally, disputing religious freedom's universality, its place in the human rights conventions, and all efforts to export it overseas.

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Many of these critics inhabit universities and swim in their prevailing intellectual currents, among these a relentless invocation of plurality and difference, a strong suspicion toward claims of universality, a particular aversion to westerners' assertions of universality, and a revulsion to the imposition of Western values on non-Western peoples. Religious freedom fits perfectly into these proclivities and antipathies. Far from being a universally valid principle, their critique runs, religious freedom is the product—and the agenda—of one culture in one historical period: the modern West. And in the West it should stay—and be kept under strict surveillance.

Islam shows up frequently in these critics' arguments. Hailing from the left end of the political spectrum, they look upon religious freedom as a rhetorical tool through which the West asserts its moral superiority over Islam and cloaks its drive to dominate Muslims. Surprisingly and ironically, though, there is a resonance between their denial of religious freedom's universality and the arguments of certain conservative critics of Islam. These latter voices regard religious freedom as a product of the West's Christian foundations and singular history, conditions they believe are unlikely to be replicated. True, they stress the uniqueness of religious freedom from a very different posture than that of the critics from the left. For them, religious freedom is to be celebrated as a unique and humane achievement of the West.

Still, though for different reasons, both groups converge in doubting religious freedom's universality and counseling against its spread. Leftist critics who are sympathetic towards Islam view religious freedom as one option among others, call for humble acceptance of this diversity, and warn against militant imposition. Critics from the right, skeptical of Islam, see religious freedom as a prized achievement, call for vigilance in guarding it, and warn against the militancy of those who reject it. Leftists think that because religious freedom is Western and Christian, it should not be foisted on Muslims; conservatives think that because religious freedom is Western and Christian, Muslims are not capable of accepting it. Right or left, the conclusion is the same: Religious freedom is not a universal principle that advocates ought to strive to ensure for everyone.

All of these critiques of religious freedom call into question the premise of the book's engagement with Islam, namely, that religious freedom is a universally valid human right derived from human dignity. The arguments must be engaged. Religious freedom will be unable to serve as a criterion in the public debate over Islam if it is, at the same time, a combatant. It cannot be a referee if it is but a member of one of the teams. Nor can we hope that religious freedom would increase in the Muslim world if it proves to be a principle that can be imposed on Muslims only from the outside.

One of the first tasks of the book is to offer a defense of religious freedom as a universal human right.

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*Daniel Philpott is a Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame and a Senior Associate Scholar at the Religious Freedom Institute.*



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<https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/cornerstone/introduction-intervening-in-a-public-debate-excerpt>

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**Religious Freedom Institute**  
316 Pennsylvania Ave. SE | Suite 501  
Washington, D.C. 20003  
202.838.7734 | [rfi.org](http://rfi.org)