
Seven Seeds of Freedom In Islam

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This is the seventh 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](#). This article features edited excerpts from chapter 6 of the book and first appeared in [The Volokh Conspiracy](#).

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](#), argues that the Muslim-majority world is not religiously free in the aggregate but that it does contain some religious freedom and that where religious freedom is lacking, Islam is not always the reason for its absence. Does Islam carry the potential for expanding religious freedom?

Through most of Islam's history, it has lacked religious freedom of the sort that today's human rights conventions set forth: a recognition of every person and religious community's right to practice and express religious faith free from overt coercion, heavy forms of pressure, discrimination, or penalties. This is admittedly a high standard and evokes this question: Compared with what? Much the same generalization could be made about any of the major world religions. It is quite late in history that we find any religious body espousing a stable, enduring, principled commitment to religious freedom. When the historian Bernard Lewis wrote in his book, *The Jews of Islam*, that "[f]or Christians and Muslims alike, tolerance is a new virtue, intolerance a new crime," he might have extended his observation to every world religion.

If Islamic history predominantly lacks religious freedom, however, the same history suffers great distortion if this dearth becomes the leading headline. Islam also contains "seeds of freedom," that is, concepts or practices that express religious freedom in a significant way but that fall short of a full and broadly respected human right of religious freedom. If nurtured, these seeds might grow into religious freedom in full bloom.

In the book, I identify seven seeds of freedom. Each seed contains potential for religious freedom. Each is also subject to skepticism about this potentiality. Only the future can tell us how this potential will develop.

The seven seeds are:

[1.] First, *verses in the Qur'an and their interpretation*. One verse in the Qur'an more than any other conveys the importance of freedom: "There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error, so whoever rejects false gods and believes in God has grasped the firmest hand-hold, one that will never break." There is no compulsion in religion. The statement is striking for the directness and simplicity with which it forbids the very coercion that religious freedom prohibits. It is rare to find such a direct exhortation of freedom in the central texts of any religious tradition. The verse—Qur'an 2:256—has not been forgotten or stranded in the Qur'an's 114 surahs, or books, but rather has been asserted by proponents of freedom time and again through the Islamic tradition. In the early centuries of Islam, for instance, the Mutazilite school, which stressed rationality, argued on the basis of this verse that faith must be an "action of the heart" and thus unhindered. Freedom undergirds this school's understanding of the world as an "Abode of Trial" in which peoples' choices carry consequences for the hereafter. Tenth-century philosopher Al-Farabi applied this Mutazilite insight to the political realm, which he thought should be one of complete freedom. Today, "the verse is being used constantly in order to substantiate the notion of religious tolerance in Islam," writes scholar Yohanan Friedmann in his book, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam*.

There are other verses in the Qur'an that lend themselves to sanctioning violence against non-Muslims. Scholars debate whether these involve calls for permanent struggle or can be situated in historical contexts where Muslims were at war with non-Muslims. The book explores these debates and points to 2:256 as the most important seed of freedom to be nurtured.

[2.] The second seed of freedom is *the life of the Prophet Muhammad*. Muslims regard the life of the Prophet—what he said, what he did—as recorded in *hadith* to be nearly as important as the Qur'an as a source of faith, law, and morals. In his life, we can find pointers to religious freedom. The Prophet's life following the first revelations to him in 610 is typically divided into two periods: one in the city of Mecca (610–622) and one in the city of Medina (622–632). During the Meccan period, his followers increased but they remained a minority and were persecuted. The real test of whether the Prophet Muhammad's life points to religious freedom lies in his behavior when he wielded the power of a political ruler and conqueror. That test would come in the Medina portion of his life. The book finds evidence for religious tolerance in this portion of his life, including the Constitution of Medina, a pact that sets forth tolerance for religious minorities, including Jews, while also noting episodes of conquest and execution of opponents.

[3.] The third seed of freedom is *the history of Muslim toleration of non-Muslims*. From Muhammad's rule emerged one practice that can be regarded as a seed of freedom: the creation of the status of the *dhimmi*, a permanent arrangement for non-Muslims living under Muslim rule that allows them to practice their faith freely while paying tribute to the government. Again, to call this practice a seed of freedom is to say that the glass is both half full and half empty. A measure of freedom exists but falls well short of the full human right of religious freedom. Optimists and skeptics towards religious freedom in Islam respectively claim the glass as half full, viewing the *dhimmi* status as a laudable tradition of tolerance, and half empty, regarding it as a demeaning plight of second-class citizenship, one that can sometimes take brutal forms. Both perspectives can find evidence. Minority status alone, though, is not religious freedom. A development into equality of citizenship is needed.

[4.] The fourth seed is *liberal Islam*. In certain pockets of history, certain Muslim countries have hosted liberalism. Liberalism here means a constitutional regime marked by the rule of law, equal citizenship, an elected legislature, civil liberties, free markets, and, yes, religious freedom. The locales where liberalism has most gained ground are the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century; Iran in the early 20th century; Egypt in the late 19th and first half of the 20th century, especially the period 1923–1952; Tunisia in the mid-19th century; and heavily Muslim regions of the Russian Empire—what are today known as the Central Asian Republics—in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

[5.] The fifth seed is *contemporary Muslim advocates of religious freedom*. While early experiences in liberal Muslim regimes were swept over by one or another form of illiberalism, today there exist Muslim scholars, jurists, clerics, and activists who advocate religious freedom as an Islamic principle. They are a seed of freedom. Their arguments admit of variation. Some focus on abolishing the death penalty for apostasy and blasphemy, issues that have pervaded the global headlines in recent years. Some call for abolishing the death penalty for these infractions but retaining other legal sanctions. Others call for religious freedom in full: no criminalizing apostasy and blasphemy, no *dhimmi* status, no discrimination. Consonant with the concept of a seed of freedom, religious freedom is partially and variously realized.

[6.] The sixth seed is *freedom in law and institutions in Muslim-majority states*. As the book generally argues, only about one-fourth of Muslim-majority states protect religious freedom in a robust way. Many have signed on to international law conventions that articulate religious freedom but others have developed alternative conventions like the Universal Declaration of Islamic Human Rights of 1980, whose protections are weak. One can say, though, that a legal deposit of religious freedom exists that can be expanded upon.

[7.] A seventh and final seed is *the separation of religion and state*. As historian Ira Lapidus argues, in the history of Islam, except for a few periods, including the founding period, religious and temporal authorities have been differentiated. There are many varieties of this differentiation, and at times, religious and temporal authorities have interpenetrated each other thoroughly. Differentiation has not always meant what Thomas Jefferson had in mind when he wrote of a wall of separation between church and state in a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association. What differentiation means is that two separate authorities exist and are not fused into one. And, as with Christian history, this is a foundation on which the more robust separation of religious freedom can be built.

These seven seeds of freedom reflect the book's combination of honesty and hope. The Muslim world is broadly lacking in religious freedom but contains the potential for far more.

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