



Cornerstone Forum

*A Conversation on Religious Freedom
and Its Social Implications*

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Realizing Religious Freedom in the Islamic World

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This is the ninth 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 9 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](#).

I hope that my new book, [Religious Freedom In Islam: The Fate of a Universal Human Right in the Muslim World Today](#), may help to cool tempers in a culture war over Islam that has been taking place in the West at least as far back as the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Complicating our categories and cooling tempers on cable news shows, though, is not my ultimate aim. Religious freedom is a call for action, not just a criterion. It demands that the dignity of all Muslims as people who submit to Allah, both in the vertical sense of worship and prayer and in the horizontal sense of their relationships and communities, be honored. It demands that the dignity of non-Muslims surrounded by Muslims be honored as well. It promises derivative benefits of peace, democracy, and economic development. It calls Western states to treat Muslim people and communities, both within and outside the West, more justly and promises that in doing so, these states, too, will reap stability and the reduction of violence and terrorism. Religious freedom is good for Islam, good for Muslims, good for non-Muslims living in Muslim societies, good for Muslims in non-Muslim societies, good for relationships between men and women in Muslim societies, and good for relations between the West and Islam.

How can religious freedom be realized? Six recommendations show the way. Derived from the analysis of the book, they are addressed to Westerners but also invite a dialogue with Muslims outside the West. The first four call for changes in thought that break out of ruts in current debates. The last two call for action on the part of Western states and on the part of transnational constituencies for religious freedom.

[1.] *Affirm religious freedom as a universal human right, not a western value.* In the minds of post-modern critics in western universities as well as certain conservatives, religious freedom is a western value that is either unjust or futile to ask Muslims to adopt. What is needed is a gestalt shift by which religious freedom comes to be regarded not as a Western value but rather as a human value. Religious freedom's enshrinement in international human rights conventions should be looked upon neither as a historical hiccup nor as a product of American hegemony but rather as a manifestation

of "the conscience of mankind" that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares human rights to be in its preamble. In the book, I explain why.

[2.] *Recognize Islam's capacity for religious freedom.* The fact that one religious tradition is less religiously free than the rest of the world at a given time does not mean that it is consigned to religious unfreedom. And the fact that a religious tradition has not taken the West's historical pathway to freedom does not mean that no other pathway is available. In previous posts—and even more so in the book—I point to evidence for religious freedom in the Muslim world and identify "seeds of freedom" that involve potentialities for growth.

I also argue that the form of Islam that is behind violence, terrorism, and religious repression today has historically contingent roots. Much can be attributed to the ideology of Islamism, or Radical Islamic Revivalism, which arose in the early and middle 20th century among intellectuals who were convinced that Islamic civilization had reached a nadir because of both internal corruption and external domination. Islamism became increasingly radicalized and violent, weaponized by transnational terrorist groups, and empowered by its marriage to the modern sovereign state, yielding the pattern of religious repression. Advocates of religious freedom in these settings remain silent, are muzzled, or are exiled. Islamism, though, is not permanent, baked into Islam's founding, or the natural upshot of Islam's texts and traditions. Absent the formidably coercive apparatus of repressive states, this would be far more apparent.

[3.] *Recognize that negative secularism is not the answer.* Secularism says that religion can become tolerant only when it ceases being religious. Repression and terrorism in Islam will cease only when Islam becomes secularized. What is meant here is the negative, or hostile, form of secularism, as opposed to positive, or healthy secularism. Negative secularism took shape in the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries and gained a new spurt of momentum in the 2000s in the writings of the New Atheists.

Unsurprisingly, when secularism gains power, the resulting regimes are repressive. Most of the purveyors of the past century's most colossal mass atrocities have been aggressively secular: Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Saddam Hussein, and Imperial Japan. Within Islam, we have seen the secular repressive pattern and its aggressive and intentional efforts to promote its program: Turkey's Atatürk, Egypt's Nasser, Iraq's Hussein, Indonesia's Suharto, Iran's Shah Pahlavi, and Syria's Assad. All of these regimes have been authoritarian and associated with severe repression. All of them have radicalized Islamists and elicited violent backlash. Some of them have committed mass atrocities or spurred civil war. All of them have been unstable and eventually overthrown or frontally challenged by their religious opponents. Secularism is not the answer to Islam's problems.

[4.] *Expand religious freedom in the Muslim world.* Islam's simultaneous capacity for and dearth of religious freedom combine to elicit a call for an expansion of religious freedom in the Muslim world. Religious freedom is good for Muslims. It is not Western decadence. It does not require a mimicking of the relationship between religion and state in the United States or any other Western state in all of its particulars—only a floor of freedom from coercion and heavy discrimination. It embodies the positive secularism that enables religious faith, not the negative secularism that constrains it. In a religiously free state, Muslim clerics and their communities have wide latitude to preach, to educate their children, and to finance, organize, and govern their communities. Muslims may persuade non-

Muslims to convert to Islam. Their religion is no bar from holding office. They may participate in politics and undertake great efforts to make their societies more faithful to the tenets of Islam. Religiously free states do not allow Muslims—or anyone else—absolute freedom, and Muslims will have to accept certain restrictions and make certain allowances that they would not be faced with in religiously repressive states. Muslims would be allowed to convert away from Islam without sanction and non-Muslims permitted to persuade them to do so. Members of other religions and Muslims considered heterodox would have full rights of citizenship, including freedom to practice their faith. Women would be allowed to doff their headscarves in Iran and don theirs in Turkey. For many heads of state and religious leaders in contemporary Muslim-majority countries, these limitations will be liabilities and perhaps too high a price to pay for freedom. Hopefully, though, the benefits of freedom for Muslims will become apparent as well to more devout Muslims in positions of influence.

[5.] Western states and the European Union ought to make religious freedom far more central and integral to their foreign policies toward Muslim-majority states. In 1998, the U.S. Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). More recently, the European Union, Canada, the United Kingdom, Austria, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Norway have adopted religious freedom into their foreign policies in one way or another. Canada reversed course, though, closing its Office of Religious Freedom in March 2016.

But is a human rights policy enough? The argument of this book is that religious freedom—in the Muslim world and everywhere—depends in good part on regimes and their political theologies. Violations of religious freedom are more than a collection of individual acts committed against individual victims. I have also shown ways in which the abridgement of religious freedom is connected to war, terrorism, violence, and instability, the reduction of which is a core interest of the United States. That religious freedom is a human right, but also much more than a human right, points to the need for new thinking in which religious freedom is integrated into the high politics of national security and alliances.

[6.] Religious freedom should be advocated as universally as possible, including through transnational networks of religious freedom constituencies. Religious freedom is a universal human right. The credibility and effectiveness of policies to realize religious freedom—in the Muslim world, everywhere—depend on these policies being shared in a way that reflects this universality. The best way to ensconce religious freedom in the common conscience of mankind rather than allow it to become one side of a clash of civilizations is to expand the network of people and organizations who share a stake in it. Religious freedom cannot only be the cause of the US and other Western governments.

In the book, I propose a transnational network of religious freedom constituencies, including civil society organizations in countries where religious freedom might be expanded, organizations in free countries that promote religious freedom, international organizations, western governments, and religious bodies. Working together, the members of such a constituency would strengthen one another and pressure unfree regimes from all sides. Historically, international communism operated on this principle, with its international network of parties and local cell groups. Premised upon a bad idea, it was not successful. More can be hoped for religious freedom.

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