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978-0-521-19705-2 - The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century

Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke

Excerpt

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Religious Persecution

Pervasive and Pernicious

On March 20, 2006, Daniel Cooney of the Associated Press reported that “an Afghan man [Abdul Rahman] is being prosecuted in a Kabul court and could be sentenced to death on a charge of converting from Islam to Christianity.”¹ The Western world seemed stunned. German chancellor Angela Merkel sought personal assurances from Afghan president Hamid Karzai that the execution would be stopped; Austrian foreign minister Ursula Plassnik promised to “leave no stone unturned to protect the fundamental rights of Abdul Rahman and to save his life”; and Pope Benedict XVI appealed to a “respect for human rights sanctioned in the preamble of the new Afghan constitution.”² Similar protests and pleas came from scores of other political and religious leaders across North America and throughout Europe.

But the most candid and emotional response came from John Howard, the Australian prime minister. He told an Australian radio network, “This is appalling. When I saw the report about this I felt sick, literally.” Howard went on to share his astonishment that this was possible: “The idea that a person could be punished because of their religious belief and the idea they might be executed is just beyond belief.”³

This book will show that violent religious persecution is neither beyond belief nor uncommon. The prime minister’s reactions no doubt reflect the

¹ As quoted in an Associated Press article by Daniel Cooney, “Afghan Man Faces Death Penalty for Christian Beliefs,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 20, 2006.

² Quoted in a BBC story, March 25, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south-asia/4841812.stm> (accessed 5 August 2010).

³ As quoted by an Associated Press article, “Afghan Judge Resists Pressure in Convert Case,” *Washington Post*, March 25, 2006.

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thoughts and emotions of many, but they do not reflect global realities. Afghanistan is not the only country to hand down harsh penalties for religious conversion nor is Islam the only world religion to deny others religious freedom. Relying on new sources of data, we will show that despite routine constitutional promises to the contrary, religious freedoms⁴ are denied around the globe and violent persecution is pervasive. We will also explain how attempts to regulate religion by supporting a single religion or restricting religions perceived as dangerous frequently lead to violent religious persecution. We will describe how religious cartels, cultural pressures, and the government's regulation of religion are tightly interwoven into an ongoing cycle of violent persecution. Indeed, we will discuss how violent religious persecution is often a form of social conflict that is embedded in or overlaps larger conflicts in society, and as such, is a type of conflict that has consequences for more than just the religious.

The foundation of this book relies on two components, one theoretical and the other empirical. The theoretical component explains why and how persecution is often the consequence of freedoms denied – an argument that began with Voltaire, Adam Smith, and David Hume but has been overlooked in recent times. The empirical component is a new source of information assembled by the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) that reports on religious freedoms and persecution around the globe. In the next sections we introduce these two components and then briefly profile violent religious persecution in the world today.

THE PACIFYING CONSEQUENCES OF FREEDOMS

The dangers of religious pluralities seemingly appear all too obvious. With ever-present religious conflicts around the globe and throughout history, religious plurality seems to be the spark, if not the flame, that leads to raging conflicts within and between countries. Indeed, this apparent relationship serves to motivate and justify states' denying religious freedoms. The concern is that to leave religion unchecked and without adequate controls will result in the uprising of religions that are dangerous to both state and citizenry.

Focusing on violent religious persecution, which is a form of social conflict, we propose just the opposite. Defining *violent religious persecution* as “physical abuse or physical displacement due to religion,” we propose that the higher the degree to which governments and societies

⁴ See Preface for definition of “religious freedoms.”

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ensure religious freedoms for all, the less violent religious persecution and conflict along religious lines there will be. Certainly, in the religiously charged world of the twenty-first century, less religious conflict is in the interests of peace and security for all nations. Our inspiration for this thesis comes from a recent theory on the effects of regulating religious expression and practice, but the intellectual foundation for this reasoning is several centuries old – and probably older.

The Despotism of a Dominant Religion

The groundwork for our thesis is laid out vividly by three of the most prominent scholars of the eighteenth century: Voltaire, Adam Smith, and David Hume. More than two and a half centuries ago François Marie Arouet, aka Voltaire, wrote: “If there were only one religion . . . there would be danger of despotism, if there were two, they would cut each other’s throats, but there are thirty, and they live in peace and happiness” (1732). He pointed to the Royal Exchange of London to make his case, noting that the Jews, Muslims, and Christians all willingly traded together and only the bankrupt were treated as infidels. No doubt his confidence that religion could be tamed was in part based on his bold contention that religion would soon disappear.⁵ But the despotism of monopoly and the peace of plurality also reflected his own life experiences in France and England. Voltaire experienced the fury of a monopoly religion and its opponents first hand. When growing up in France, Voltaire’s older brother, Armand, became a member of the persecuted Jansenists sect, which arose in France in opposition to Jesuit theology within the Roman Catholic Church. Two years later, Voltaire was forced to attend a Jesuit school at the age of ten, and he would later be imprisoned because of his endless attacks on French authorities, including Christianity and the Roman Catholic Church.⁶ When he was eventually exiled to England, he marveled that the plurality of sects promoted a peace that was so elusive in France.

A few decades later Adam Smith echoed Voltaire’s concerns about religious monopolies and his assurances about plurality: “[The] active zeal of religious teachers can be dangerous and troublesome only where

⁵ Durant & Durant (1965).

⁶ Myers (1985) recounts that when their core reforms were officially condemned by Pope Clement in 1713, and the king was forced to accept the bull in 1714, the movement fell into decline.

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there is, either but one sect tolerated in the society, or where the whole of a large society is divided into two or three great sects.”⁷ He went on to explain, however, that the “zeal must be altogether innocent where the society is divided into two or three hundred, or perhaps into as many [as a] thousand small sects, of which no one could be considerable enough to disturb the public tranquility.”⁸ For Smith, however, the argument was based on theoretical common sense rather than personal experiences.⁹ He explains that if sects are numerous enough, no single sect is large enough to be harmful. The obvious question that follows, of course, is how are the numerous sects generated? For Smith the answer is simple: “[I]f the government was perfectly decided both to let them all alone, and to oblige them all to let alone one another, there is little danger that they would not of their own accord subdivide themselves fast enough, so as soon to become sufficiently numerous.”¹⁰ Letting “them all alone” allowed for an open propagating of faith by multiple religions; obliging the religions to “let alone one another” ensured that no single religion would hold control over another. Religious plurality, for Smith, was the natural state of affairs and such plurality resulted in a public tranquility.

David Hume offered a similar observation and concurred that the government must leave the various religions alone and must require all religions to leave one another alone.

If [a magistrate] admits only one religion among his subjects, he must sacrifice, to an uncertain prospect of tranquillity [sic], every consideration of public liberty, science, reason, industry, and even his own independency. If he gives indulgence to several sects, which is the wiser maxim, he must preserve a very philosophical indifference to all of them, and carefully restrain the pretensions of the prevailing sect; otherwise he can expect nothing but endless disputes, quarrels, factions, persecutions, and civil commotions. ([posthumously published in 1780] 1854:223)

Hume brings an important nuance to the discussion by drawing attention to the fact that constraints must be placed on the “pretensions of the prevailing sect.” Without such constraints, Hume contends, the dominant religion will seek to control other religions. Thus, Hume and Smith are suggesting that religions must be protected from both the state and one another.

⁷ Smith ([1776] 1976:314).

⁸ Smith ([1776] 1976:314).

⁹ Stark (2001:122) recently summarized Smith’s argument with the following proposition: “[C]onflict will be maximized where, other things being equal, a few powerful and particularistic religious organizations coexist” (italics in the original).

¹⁰ Smith ([1776] 1976:315).

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As Voltaire, Smith, and Hume discussed the theoretical principles of religious monopoly and competition, a grand experiment testing these principles was being conducted across the Atlantic. When Thomas Jefferson appealed to his fellow Virginians in 1784 to eliminate religious establishments and assure religious freedoms for all, he pointed to the success of two states without religious establishments: Pennsylvania and New York. He explained that even without a religious establishment social order was maintained and the many sects “perform the office of a Censor” for the others

of various kinds, indeed, but all good enough; all sufficient to preserve peace and order: or if a sect arises, whose tenets would subvert morals, good sense has fair play, and reasons and laughs it out of doors, without suffering the state to be troubled with it.

Jefferson went on to conclude that based on their “experiment,” Pennsylvania and New York “have made the happy discovery, that *the way to silence religious disputes, is to take no notice of them*” (italics added).¹¹ This discovery provided strong support for the predictions of scholars on the other side of the Atlantic.

Although the most immediate concerns of European and colonial writers were the many sects within Protestantism, they did not view the principle as being limited to Protestantism or Christianity. In his autobiography, Thomas Jefferson argued that the bill for establishing religious freedom “was meant to be universal” and included “within the mantle of its protection the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan [sic], the Hindoo [sic], and Infidel of every denomination.”¹² He explained that when he wrote the preamble establishing religious freedom in Virginia, the great majority rejected an attempt to make explicit references to Jesus Christ.¹³ In his “Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments,” James Madison pointed to a danger in establishing Christianity because the same human authority that establishes Christianity above all other religions can also be used to exclude all Christian sects but one.

Jefferson, Madison, and each of the European scholars mentioned earlier recognized the potential danger of limiting religious practice to a

¹¹ Jefferson ([1787] 1954:160–161).

¹² Jefferson (2005:71).

¹³ Jefferson (2005:71) wrote that any attempts at religious coercion “are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion.” When an amendment was proposed to change the wording to “a departure from the plan of the Jesus Christ, the holy author of our religion,” he reports that “the insertion was rejected by a great majority.”

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single religion or to two or three competing religions. They argued that not only did this deny the freedoms of individuals, it also threatened the security of the state. This keen insight provides the starting point for our understanding of violent religious persecution – an understanding that can also help dispel what former diplomat and scholar Thomas F. Farr calls a “dangerous disarray and confusion” among many policy makers over how to constructively understand the dynamics of religion and human freedom.¹⁴ Building on the expansive theoretical literature on “religious economies,” which we describe in the following section, we will propose that when religious freedoms are denied through the regulation of religious profession or practice, violent religious persecution and conflict will increase. Conversely, the lifting of restrictions on religious profession or practice should result in less persecution and conflict and consequently more peace and security.

Consequences of Restricting Religious Freedom

When James Madison wrote the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, he was well aware that religious groups and their followers needed protections from both the state and dominant religions.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

The first clause protected minority religions (and the state) from the tyranny of a dominant religion and the second protected religion from the tyranny of the state. As we will review in greater detail in Chapter 2, both the state and dominant religions have motives for restricting religious activity. The state, of course, restricts the freedoms of religions perceived to be a threat to the social order or the ruling regime, but restrictions can also arise from forces beyond the state. Dominant religions (sometimes not even the religion of the majority of the population), in particular, will try to limit the actions of other religions. Together, the state and dominant religions often unite to limit religious freedoms; and such limitations have powerful consequences.

A growing body of research and theory has shown how regulating religion curbs religious activity. Known as a “supply-side” or “religious economies” model, this theory argues that regulations restrict the supply of religion by changing the incentives and opportunities for religious

¹⁴ Thomas F. Farr (2008:xi).

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producers (religious leaders and organizations) and the viable options for religious consumers (members of religious organizations).¹⁵ That is, religious leaders and their followers face restrictions on the practice and profession of their religion as well as their opportunities to proselytize and convert others to their faith. For religious organizations, these regulations increase entry and operating costs by restricting their ability to form and operate places of worship. For potential adherents, religious choices are reduced and they face inflated costs when joining groups not condoned by the state.

The religious economies model was initially used to explain the surge in religious activity in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the number of religions multiplied and the rate of church adherence increased from 17 percent of the population in 1776 to 51 percent by 1890.¹⁶ The model has since been used to explain religious change around the globe.¹⁷ Anthony Gill,¹⁸ Andrew Chestnut,¹⁹ and others have documented the surge in religious competition and growth in Latin America. After four centuries of a monopoly religion, evangelical Christians burst onto the scene as religious freedoms were granted in the latter half of the twentieth century, with the percentage of evangelicals in the population doubling and tripling over the past thirty years.²⁰ For example, while Brazil has more Roman Catholics than any other country, it also has more Pentecostals than does the United States.²¹ The increase in religious freedoms in Taiwan has been more recent, but no less dramatic. After the 1989 Law on Civic Organizations allowed all religions to exist and removed multiple prohibitions, Yungfeng Lu reports that there was a twelvefold increase in the number of different religious groups in Taiwan (from 83 in 1990 to 1,062 in 2004) and the total number of temples and churches more than doubled.²² Moving to the post-Soviet countries, Paul Froese found a very similar trend with religious revivalism

¹⁵ Finke (1990).¹⁶ Finke & Stark (1992).¹⁷ Stark & Finke (2000:218–258).¹⁸ Gill (1998).¹⁹ Chestnut (2003).²⁰ Although sources vary on the number of evangelicals in Latin American countries, all show a rapid increase. For a more detailed report on the religious demography of Guatemala, Chile, and Brazil, see Pew Forum *Spirit and Power* (2006), <http://pewforum.org/Christian/Evangelical-Protestant-Churches/Spirit-and-Power.aspx> (accessed 5 August 2010).²¹ Pew Forum (2006), *Spirit and Power*.²² Lu (2008). See Kuo (2008) for a discussion on religion and the emergence of democracy in Taiwan.

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increasing and atheism declining as regulations were initially lifted.²³ Also, in agreement with the theory, the trend has slowed or even reversed as regulations have returned. Perhaps most convincing, Jonathan Fox and Ephraim Tabory found that “state regulation of religion is significantly and negatively correlated with religiosity” when using a database of 81 nations.²⁴ This growing body of research has consistently shown how shifts in the freedoms granted explain major religious change.

We extend this argument in two significant ways. First, we increase the scope of the argument. Whereas past work sought to explain levels of religious activity, we seek to explain the level of violent religious persecution. Elaborating on the work of the eighteenth-century scholars, we propose that as religious freedoms increase, violent religious persecution and conflict decline. The freedoms lead to a rich plurality in which no single religion can monopolize religious activity and all religions can compete on a level playing field. Religious grievances against the state and other religions are reduced because all religions can compete for the allegiance of people without the interference of the state.

Not only do these freedoms for all reduce the grievances of religions, they also decrease the ability of any single religion to wield undue political power. When a religious group achieves a monopoly and holds access to the temporal power and privileges of the state, including placing restrictions on other religions, the ever-present temptation is to openly persecute religious competitors and any in society that oppose their interpretations. In contrast, when the state offers identical privileges to all religions and power to none, no single religion can claim the authority of the state. Thus, we propose that to the degree that governments and societies ensure religious freedoms for all, there will be less conflict between religions and less violent religious persecution.

Our second extension is more subtle but equally important. Rather than limit our attention to the state’s efforts to restrict freedoms, we look at restrictions that are embedded in the larger culture or in institutions and movements beyond the state. Restrictions on select religions are often mobilized by a dominant religion that either lacks the authority of the state or wants to go beyond the state’s actions. Previous work shows that even when religious economies are unregulated by the state, religious cartels form in an attempt to restrict the activities of other religions.²⁵

²³ Froese (2001, 2004).

²⁴ Fox and Tabory (2008:245).

²⁵ Finke & Stark (2005:216–224).

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Yet this form of regulation has received little attention. Religions, social movements, cultural context, and institutions beyond the state can all foster actions that lead to persecution. Accordingly, we look at both the *legal* and *social* restrictions that inhibit the practice, profession, or selection of religion.

Including both government and social forces is important for three reasons. First, research has shown that legal restrictions on religion as well as the easing of legal restrictions arise from social origins. Popular religious movements, religious plurality, immigration patterns, political stability, and economic interests have all driven changes in the legal regulations placed on religion around the globe.²⁶ Jefferson's espousal of the principles of religious freedom might have fallen on deaf ears if religious plurality wasn't a reality and a diversity of immigrants an economic necessity in the young American nation. Second, social restrictions on religion are important to include because the enforcement of any type of legal restrictions relies on social cooperation. For example, William I. Brustein documents the preexistence of widespread anti-Semitism throughout Europe prior to the Holocaust. This anti-Semitism eased the enactment of regulations against Jews and enhanced the enforcement of such regulations.²⁷ And third, when certain religions are targets of government persecution, this can result in tit-for-tat reprisals between government forces and the group being targeted, especially if the group is or becomes radicalized. For instance, when examining the atrocities of the 1990s in Algeria, Hafez noted that religiously motivated groups operating under repressive regimes became cohesive social forces that in turn restricted and persecuted those who did not support their agendas.²⁸ As a result, they drew the attention of the government and opened the door for even more persecution. The end result is an ongoing violent religious persecution cycle: restrictions on religious freedoms → persecution → more restrictions → persecution. Understanding both social and government attempts to restrict religious freedoms is essential for explaining violent religious persecution.

We will develop and illustrate this thesis more fully in the chapters that follow, but we should acknowledge that this thesis defies the general consensus of many. Indeed, as we will show in Chapter 3, the implications of Samuel P. Huntington's highly persuasive *Clash of Civilizations*

²⁶ Finke (1990); Gill (2005).

²⁷ Brustein (2003).

²⁸ Hafez (2004).

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argument contrast sharply with our own.²⁹ Whereas Huntington calls on countries to avoid conflicts by reaffirming their commitment to a single civilization, we propose that attempts to force religious homogeneity within a country can result in conflict.

Likewise, many view religious regulations as a necessity for controlling social conflict. For instance, we both have had conversations with Chinese government officials who do not question whether religious regulation is good or bad; they simply believe that it is the role of the state to regulate religion. For them, the question is how much regulation is the right amount to maintain a “harmonious society.”

As we explore this question throughout the book, we find a close connection between violent religious persecution and conflict. Once a religious persecution cycle is set in motion, persecution can become a constituent element of social conflict that affects more than just the religious communities themselves. Although our focus is on the victims of violent religious persecution, it will become clear that because much of the religious persecution in the twenty-first century occurs at the hands of people in society, violent religious persecution and social conflict often occur in tandem – the victim of violence can sometimes become the perpetrator of more violence leading to a cycle of violence. Furthermore, in Chapter 6 we will discuss how social attempts to restrict religious freedoms underly religion-related terrorism.

The central irony we demonstrate throughout this book is that although governments typically view restricting religious freedoms as a necessity to maintain order and reduce potential violence, the fact is that fewer religious freedoms often results in more violent persecution and conflict. We acknowledge the potential tension of multiple religions residing in the same country, but we draw attention to the violent consequences (often unintended) of religious restrictions. We look at the price of freedom denied.

FROM CLAIMS TO COUNTS:

THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGION DATA INITIATIVE

Claims of violent religious persecution are many. Each week Forum 18 (www.forum18.org) reports on Muslims, Christians, and religious minorities being persecuted in the former Soviet Union. The organization [Persecution.org](http://www.thepersecution.org) (www.thepersecution.org) details the persecution of

²⁹ Huntington (1993, 1996).