PERSECUTION & TOLERATION

The Long Road to Religious Freedom

Religious freedom has become an emblematic value in the West. Embedded in constitutions and championed by politicians and thinkers across the political spectrum, it is to many an absolute value, something beyond question. Yet how it emerged, and why, remains widely misunderstood. Tracing the history of religious persecution from the Fall of Rome to the present-day, Noel Johnson and Mark Koyama provide a novel explanation of the birth of religious liberty. This book treats the subject in an integrative way by combining economic reasoning with historical evidence from medieval and early modern Europe. The authors elucidate the economic and political incentives that shaped the actions of political leaders during periods of state building and economic growth.

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The Long Road to Religious Freedom

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Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Preface

Acknowledgments

1  Toleration, Persecution, and State Capacity  
  1.1  Introduction  
  1.2  The Rise of Modern States and the Birth of Religious Liberty  
  1.3  A Conceptual Framework

I  CONDITIONAL TOLERATION

2  Religion and the State in the Premodern World  
  2.1  Religious Legitimacy and the State  
  2.2  A Simple Model of Church and State  
  2.3  Applying the Model: The Medieval Equilibrium  
  2.4  The Absence of Persecution Does Not Imply Religious Freedom  
  2.5  Chapter Summary

3  Why Do States Persecute?  
  3.1  The Commercial Revolution, Religion, and Identity Rules  
  3.2  Rise of the Medieval State and the Persecuting Society  
  3.3  Chapter Summary: Persecutions and the Rise of States in Medieval Europe

4  Jewish Communities, Conditional Toleration, and Rent-Seeking  
  4.1  Rent-Seeking and Conditional Toleration  
  4.2  Jewish Moneylending  
  4.3  The Path to Expulsion in England  
  4.4  Chapter Summary and the Road to Expulsion in France
Contents

5 Climatic Shocks and Persecutions 94
  5.1 The Vulnerability of the Conditional Toleration Equilibrium 95
  5.2 Temperature Shocks and Jewish Persecutions across Europe 96
  5.3 Chapter Summary: Climate Shocks on the Conditional Toleration Equilibrium 106

6 The Shock of the Black Death 108
  6.1 The Black Death Pogroms 112
  6.2 Black Death Pogroms across Europe 116
  6.3 The Argument Thus Far ... A Summary of Part I 117

II THE ORIGINS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM 121

7 State Building and the Reformation 123
  7.1 The Reformation 124
  7.2 State Building 126
  7.3 The Reformation and Religious Persecution 128
  7.4 Temporary Religious Tolerance 138
  7.5 Religious Peace Elsewhere in Europe 143
  7.6 Chapter Summary: The Impact of the Reformation 146

8 The Inquisition and the Establishment of Religious Homogeneity in Spain 153
  8.1 The Conversos “Problem” 154
  8.2 The Threat of the Reformation in Spain 159
  8.3 The Decline of Spain and the Continuation of the Inquisition 162
  8.4 Chapter Summary: The Legacy of the Inquisition 164

9 From Confessionalization to Toleration and Then to Religious Liberty 167
  9.1 The Breakdown of Conditional Toleration in the Holy Roman Empire 168
  9.2 The Fall and Rise of Religious Toleration in France 169
  9.3 The Emergence of a Modern State in England 173
  9.4 Chapter Summary: The Rise of the State and the Abandonment of Religious Regulation 179

10 From Persecution to Emancipation 184
  10.1 The Decline in Jewish Persecutions 185
  10.2 Jewish Emancipation 192
  10.3 The Argument Thus Far ... A Summary of Part II 197

III IMPLICATIONS OF GREATER RELIGIOUS LIBERTY 201

11 The Persecution of Witchcraft 203
  11.1 Explanations for the European Witch Panic 205
  11.2 Legal Fragmentation in France 211
Contents

11.3 Legal Centralization and the Decline in Witchcraft Trials 216
11.4 The Growth in Legal Capacity 220
11.5 Other Parts of Europe 220
11.6 Chapter Summary: Legal Centralization and Rule of Law 224

12 Religious Minorities and Economic Growth 229
12.1 Minorities and Economic Development 229
12.2 Jewish Communities and City Growth 231
12.3 The Relationship between Jewish Communities and City Growth 232
12.4 Access to the Network of Jewish Communities 234
12.5 Chapter Summary: Liberalism and Markets Enabled Religious Minorities to Contribute to Growth 239

13 The Emergence of Modern States, Religious Freedom, and Modern Economic Growth 245
13.2 Nationalism and General Rules 248
13.3 Fiscal Capacity and National Identity in Ancien Regime France 250
13.4 Modern States and Modern Economic Growth 253
13.5 Innovation and Modern Economic Growth 257
13.6 Chapter Summary: The Demise of Conditional Toleration and Modern Economic Growth 259

14 Applying Our Argument to the Rest of the World 262
14.1 The Middle East 262
14.2 China and Japan 268
14.3 The United States 275
14.4 Chapter Summary 278

15 Modern States, Liberalism, and Religious Freedom 281
15.1 Exclusionary versus Inclusive Nationalism 284
15.2 Power States 285
15.3 The Holocaust 287
15.4 Chapter Summary 290

16 Conclusions 293
16.1 A Summary of Our Argument 294
16.2 Alternative and Complementary Hypotheses 298
16.3 Implications of Our Argument for Today 304

Bibliography 312
Index 351
Figures

1.1 Tax revenues in relation to unskilled wages for Austria, the Dutch Republic, England, France, Prussia, and Spain between 1500 and 1800 page 14

1.2 The conditional toleration equilibrium that prevailed in Europe prior to 1500 16

1.3 The religious liberty equilibrium that arose in many parts of Europe after 1800 18

2.1 Coronation of Charlemagne in 800 CE 34

2.2 Coronation of Napoleon in 1804 34

3.1 Total urban population 800–1500 54

3.2 Urbanization rates 800–1500 54

3.3 The Kingdom of France in 1180 59

3.4 The Kingdom of France in 1223 60

3.5 Political boundaries of Western Europe in 1000. Based on Nussli (2011) 65

4.1 Details showing the punishment of usurers from Giotto’s Arena Chapel 79

5.1 Temperature deviations (five-year averages) in Kitzingen 1100–1350. The Armleder pogroms (1336–1338) followed a period of extremely cold temperature in Alsace and Franconia 98

5.2 Reconstructed growing season temperature deviations in 1300 100

5.3 Jewish persecutions, 1100–1800 101

5.4 Cereal suitability in Europe 104

6.1 Black Death mortality rates (%) in 1347–1352 109

6.2 Persecution intensity in archbishoprics, bishoprics, and imperial free cities 116

7.1 Michael Servetus and Jean Calvin 129

7.2 Executions of heretics by généralité 135

7.3 Distance of heresy executions from high court in Provence located at Aix-en-Provence 136
List of Figures

7.4 Distance of trials from regional Parlement, 1520–1560 137
9.1 Total tax revenue divided by nominal GDP, 1290–1815 177
10.1 The effect of temperature on persecution probability over time 186
10.2 The rise of state capacity in early modern Western Europe 189
10.3 Partial and full emancipation of Jews across selected European countries 195
11.1 Total tax revenues and tailles revenues, 1600–1695 213
11.2 Distribution of witchcraft trials across French généralités 217
11.3 Tailles receipts per capita across French généralités 218
11.4 Incidence rate ratios from negative binomial regressions indicating the effects of our key variables on the number of witch trials 219
11.5 The effect of investment in fiscal capacity in the seventeenth century on legal expenditure in the subsequent century 221
11.6 Locations of witch trials and executions, 1300–1850 222
11.7 Elevation and state boundaries in Europe in 1500 223
11.8 The correlation between witch trials and proxies for the costs of investing in state capacity across Europe 224
12.1 Matching the cities in the Bairoch dataset and Jewish communities 233
12.2 The effect of a Jewish community on city growth 234
12.3 Example of a 10 × 10 kilometer grid with four travel technologies 235
12.4 The least cost path between Paris and Rome 236
12.5 The effect of Jewish communities on city growth rates over time 237
13.1 National identity in the 1789 General Cahiers 251
13.2 The discontinuity in national identity at the CGF border 252
13.3 Direct tax receipts 1817–1821 and national identity 256
13.4 Tax on notary contracts and national identity 256
16.2 Religious regulation, 1990–2008 and state fiscal capacity 307
16.3 Religious fractionalization and government regulation of religion in low-capacity states 307
16.4 Religious fractionalization and government regulation of religion in high-capacity states 308
Tables

3.1 Brief chronology of medieval heresy  page 53
4.1 Brief chronology of England’s Jewish community  83
5.1 An example of difference-in-differences  101
7.1 Brief chronology of the French Reformation  139
7.2 Brief chronology of the English Reformation  142
Preface

Today many liberal values are under pressure as a result of tensions arising from a complex combination of economic stress, populism, and large-scale immigration. Religious freedom is a crucial component of liberalism. Yet both ordinary language and judicial interpretations of what this freedom entails and what it means to be “tolerant” are increasingly contested.

In this environment, it is ever more important to understand the origins and development of liberal values such as religious freedom. This is the aim of our book. We seek to understand the rise of religious freedom in Western Europe from the Middle Ages to the modern age.

In so doing we provide a history of the rise of liberalism and of modern states. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes the present as *A Secular Age* (2007). Church attendance is falling, not only in Western Europe where the decline has been evident for decades, but also more recently in North America. But this should not obscure the importance of religion for understanding either past societies or the present. Not least, the freedom of individuals to choose their own religious faith is crucial to the more general principles of freedom of thought and freedom of conscience. To put it bluntly, to understand the rise of liberalism, one has to study the history of religious freedom. And to understand religious freedom, one needs to study the historical relationship between religion and the state.

Religious freedom did not exist in the premodern world. Because of the role religion played in upholding political order by offering legitimacy to rulers, political elites sought control over religious practice. In the absence of genuine religious freedom, there was at best what we call *conditional toleration*.

We document how these concerns helped shape a self-reinforcing equilibrium that governed most premodern societies and how a series of developments in Western Europe after 1500 undermined it. Our argument focuses on changes at the level of institutions that gave rise to the rule of law and to religious and other freedoms.
This book is a work of social scientific history. It is history, as we are primarily interested in explaining how religious liberty arose, rather than in drawing direct policy lessons for today or in making moral or philosophical arguments. It is social science, as we use concepts from economics and political science to structure our argument. In particular, we use empirical techniques from economics to provide evidence for our claims. As social science, our arguments should have relevance beyond our specific historical setting.

Though our subject matter is the rise of religious freedom, we are only indirectly interested in the content of religious doctrine or belief. Other scholars know much more about theology than we do. Similarly, our debt to the secondary literature on subjects such as the Albigensian Crusade, the Reformation, and Jewish emancipation is clearly laid out in the endnotes. We write this book as economists who are interested first and foremost in the evolution of political and economic institutions and we hope it will be of general interest to scholars, students, and others interested in economics, history, politics, and religion.
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