**Book Review**

**Religious freedom in Islam. The fate of a universal human right in the Muslim world today** by Daniel Philpott, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, xvii+305 pp., £22.99 (Hardback), ISBN 9780190908188

What is religious freedom? What’s it got to do with democratization? Where does Islam come in? Religious freedom is a key human right, a major component of a liberal democracy, the ability to practise your religion freely. It is often suggested, especially by Western scholars, that Islam is deficient in both regards: poor at religious freedom and poor at democracy. Is there something inherent in Islam which is incompatible with both?

Philpott examines these issues in *Religious Freedom in Islam*. Is the relative lack of religious freedom in most Muslim-majority countries, compared to, say, most Western liberal democracies, simply due to the nature and characteristics of Islam? Or is there something else which explains the situation? Philpott embarks on his analysis with an open mind and does not start with a pre-conceived notion of Islam in relation to religious freedom.

Philpott’s analysis is divided into an introduction and eight other chapters. In the introduction, he sets out positions among prominent scholars explaining the global state of religious freedom. Some see religious freedom as a Western imposition on the rest of the world, while others regard religious freedom as an absolute; a universal human right which has a clear and consistent link to democracy. From this latter perspective, the more religious freedom, the more democracy, especially its liberal components.

Chapter 1 is Philpott’s justification for his position: religious freedom is essential as it is indicative of the status of other human rights in a country and by extension a state’s overall democratic position. In other words, religious freedom matters not “just” in and of itself but because it is a litmus test of human rights more generally: no religious freedom, no human rights.

Chapters 2–4 cover respectively: “Religiously free states in the Muslim world”, “Secular repressive states in the Muslim world”, and “Religiously repressive states in the Muslim world”. Chapter 5 looks at the impact of the 2011 Arab Uprisings on religious freedom in the Arab world. Chapter 6 looks at “the seven seeds of freedom” in Islam, that is, the potential roots of greater religious freedom found in the Qur’an and the pronouncements of the prophet Muhammad. Chapter 7 suggests that Muslim-majority states with poor or worse track records on religious freedom can improve. The concluding chapter sets out a pathway for enhanced religious freedom in Muslim-majority countries that need improvements.

Philpott’s approach is admirably even handed. He seems genuinely uncertain what the role of Islam is in whether a state has a good, poor or indifferent record on religious freedom. He is unequivocal that there is nothing inherent in Islam which necessarily denies religious freedom or any other fundamental human right or democracy. What goes wrong then? Why are many Muslim-majority countries deniers of human rights, including religious freedom and democracy? If it is not their religious make up, what is it?

Philpott is right, I think, to point to the nature of the political regimes in many Muslim countries as the root cause for a poor track record on religious freedom. He locates the global “gold standard” of religious freedom, again correctly I think, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) a cornerstone of the United Nations’ approach to human rights.

If it is not the fundamental nature of the faith of Islam which explains frequent deficiencies in religious freedom in Muslim-majority countries, what is it? Philpott answers this question by pointing to key aspects of the structure of international relations, especially decolonization after World War II and the subsequent process of creating new nation-states in most Muslim-majority countries. In contrast, most Western countries have three things in common: nation-states that developed over long periods, many from the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648; Christianity as their foundation; and liberal democratic characteristics which also developed over long periods.

Muslim-majority countries are different. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, sometimes said to be the Muslim world’s United Nations, has 57-member states. None are in the West. None have Christian foundations. The great majority – that is, with a very few exceptions – were colonies: either of Western countries, mainly Britain and France, or were subservient to Istanbul during the Ottoman empire which ended after World War I. Many former Ottoman territories were – albeit briefly – de facto colonies of France or Britain until after World War II.

What does all this mean for religious freedom in Muslim-majority countries today? The very different circumstances of their creation compared to Western states, their lack of Christian foundations (often said to be linked to the West’s religious freedom, human rights and democracy), and the desire of most post-colonial rulers to rule undemocratically, explains the deficiencies for Philpott.

Philpott’s treatment of the issue is exemplary: clear, well-structured, even-handed and evidence-based. His book would usefully be read by anyone with an interest in religious freedom, human rights, democracy and how power is wielded in post-colonial countries. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Philpott, a scholar of international standing, has done the “Muslim world” a sterling service by explaining carefully and clearly that “the problem” is not Islam. It is to be found in the post-colonial circumstances of the creation of most Muslim-majority countries, their common lack of democratic mechanisms, and a lack of means to change things. Evidence is provided in Chapter 5: in the Arab Uprisings of a decade ago, there were apparently spontaneous revolts from civil society, reflecting the desperation of millions of people crushed by the weight of often intolerable structures and processes of unaccountable power. With the exception of Tunisia none managed to change the status quo, including the religious freedom regime – except in many cases for the worse as incumbent rulers turned the screw on human rights, including religious freedom and democracy.

Jeffrey Haynes

London Metropolitan University