

# Islam and Belief

At Home with  
Religious Freedom



ABDULLAH SAEED

ON THE COVER

The calligraphy in Arabic on the cover is from chapter 2, verse 256 of the Quran:

*There is no compulsion in religion:  
true guidance has become distinct from error.*

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**ABDULLAH SAEED**

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## Introduction

God spoke to the Prophet Muhammad in order to move, indeed to convert, human hearts to know and believe in God. Without the possibility of conversion, without the possibility of individual practice and belief (which may at times have been at odds with wider political and religious sentiment), there could have been no believers in the message Muhammad relayed. Thus, authentic individual belief itself is at the center of the religion of Islam.

The Quran considers belief in God, the Creator and Sustainer, to be a human good in itself and the basis for sound religion, morality, and ethics; therefore, the right to such belief should be protected by all means. This is what is meant by “religious freedom”: the right to believe, the right to adopt a religion, the right to practice one’s faith, and the right to engage in interpretive disagreements while seeking to understand and practice that faith.

Similarly, protecting the right to believe and practice one’s faith is one of the most important functions of communities and governments. More accurately, these social structures can help remove obstacles between human beings and their authentic belief by providing opportunities for independent religious decision making without pressure from anyone. Such an environment requires religious freedom for non-Muslims living among Muslims and for Muslims themselves.

## Religious Freedom for Non-Muslims in Muslim-Majority States

The Quran shows a remarkable degree of tolerance toward other religions. Revealed during a time of diversity in religious traditions, institutions, and values in Arabia, it recognizes that different religious traditions and belief systems (as well as unbelief) will always exist and that forced belief is no belief at all. Several verses in the Quran declare the divine origins of other faiths<sup>1</sup> (see Quran 3:84) and are generally

complimentary about the teachings of those faiths (see Quran 5:44), though some verses are critical.<sup>2</sup> It gives a relatively prominent place to Judaism and Christianity, regarding them as legitimate in the sight of God. Criticisms of these religions tend to be specific rather than general in nature, usually addressing a particular subgroup.<sup>3</sup>

The Quran considers both Judaism and Christianity to be revealed religions “of the Book,” approaching their sacred scriptures with respect. The same degree of respect, however, is not shown to belief systems that involve idol worship (widespread in Arabia at the time of the Quran). Their beliefs, practices, and values are not recognized as legitimate. Still, the Quran urges Muslims to deal with *all* people, including idolaters, with respect, as long as they too show respect. It also strongly rejects the ideas of forcing anyone to adopt Islam or of initiating hostilities toward any non-Muslim community with whom Muslims have peaceful relations.

The Prophet’s *practice* also reflected the Quranic view of religious freedom and noncoercion. After his migration to Medina in 622 CE, Muhammad continued with the same message of individual freedom concerning belief and upheld the principle that no one should be forced to convert to Islam. A strong Jewish community existed in Medina at the time of his arrival, and he concluded an agreement between the Muslims and the Jews. Terms of this agreement, known as the “Constitution of Medina,” suggest that Muslims considered the Jewish people an essential part of the community and that, despite religious differences, all parties were to be treated equally without discrimination. For example, one of its provisions affirms, “The Jews of Bani Awf will be treated as one community with the Believers [Muslims]. The Jews have their religion.”<sup>4</sup>

The Constitution of Medina laid a foundation for future relationships between the Muslim ruling authority and *dhimma* (protected religious minorities) that took root in subsequent Muslim states. The dhimmi (a member of this minority) retained freedom of religion based on the Quranic principle of no compulsion in religion (see Quran 2:256). In return for the protection offered by the Muslim state, as well as exemption from military service, adult males of sound mind were expected to pay a poll tax (*jizya*).<sup>5</sup>



The dhimma contract offered non-Muslims security of life and property, defense against military attack, communal self-government, and freedom of religious practice. Dhimmi were allowed to retain their own religious organizations and personal status codes, which covered marriage, divorce, inheritance, and guardianship. These codes were enforced by their own ‘courts’. Thus the legal and social status of non-Muslims under Muslim rule continued relatively unchanged into the Ottoman Empire and the modern period.<sup>6</sup> (Today, as the nature of the nation-state has changed, Muslim scholars are reconsidering concepts such as the dhimma and are arguing rather for structures promoting equal citizenship.)

In 631 CE, a Christian delegation from a province called Najran, in Arabia, arrived in Medina to visit the Prophet Muhammad. This occasion resulted in an agreement that regulated the status of Christians in Najran. Clearly tolerant toward Christians, the Prophet allowed them even to pray in his mosque.<sup>7</sup> The agreement included terms clearly suggesting that the Christian elders had the freedom to manage their own churches and guaranteeing the protection of the position of the religious leaders.<sup>8</sup>

The religious freedom permitted to non-Muslims, especially “People of the Book,” continued during the period of the early rulers of Islam, particularly the first four Caliphs (632–661 CE).<sup>9</sup> According to Abu Zahrah, a prominent twentieth-century scholar from al-Azhar University of Egypt, “The early Muslims have shown great care and sensitivity not to compel anyone in the matter of religion.”<sup>10</sup> An example is second caliph Umar b. al-Khattab’s (634–644 CE) treatment of the Christians of Jerusalem. Umar guaranteed the safety of their lives and churches by assuring them that no one would be harmed on account of his or her religion.<sup>11</sup>

The Pact of Umar, an early document attributed to either Umar b. al-Khattab or the Umayyad caliph Umar b. Abd al-Aziz, influenced Muslim thinking on the relations between Muslims and those outside of the faith community. It said, in relation to Christians, “Their churches will neither be touched nor destroyed; they and their dependents will not undergo any damage and it will be the same for their crosses and their processions.”<sup>12</sup>

Continuing with this tradition, in the later part of Islamic history, the Ottoman Empire (fifteenth to twentieth centuries CE) also relied on the notion of *dhimma* in the regulation of its religious communities (“millets”). This idea was institutionalized into the millet system: “a series of ad hoc arrangements” that gave each of the major religious communities “a degree of legal autonomy and authority.”<sup>13</sup> Millets could set their own laws, have their own religious courts, and collect and distribute their own taxes. This system granted non-Muslims within the Muslim state a great deal of autonomy in both religious and nonreligious affairs.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Quran on Religious Freedom*

The Quran itself does not provide specific, detailed guidelines for the freedoms of non-Muslims living within a Muslim society. It does seem to clearly distinguish between two types of non-Muslims: those who were hostile to the emerging Muslim community and state and prepared to use violence against it, and those who coexisted cooperatively. It also points out that the origin of all the revealed faiths is the same: God. This suggests that it does not deny the followers of other faiths the freedom to choose, retain, and practice the religion to which they wish to adhere.

In fact, the Quran does not totally renounce Christians or Jews as such; it says that there are sincere believers among them, as well as those who do not really believe (i.e., those who are nominal believers). Moreover, it clearly states that the message of God has been sent to every nation on earth. While Islamic theology does require that a Muslim believe in certain enumerated ideas, the Quran does, in some verses, take a minimalist approach to who is accepted by God as a “believer,” stating that “all who believe in God and the last day, and who do righteous deeds shall have their reward with their Sustainer, they shall not fear nor shall they grieve” (Quran 2:62).

Even those who do not believe in the One God and are in fact pagans, if not engaged in hostilities with the Muslim community, are not only to be tolerated but also sought as partners in peace. Just because a person happens to be from another religion does not mean that person may be harmed. The manner in which Muslims are to coexist with their

pagan neighbors in times of peace is clarified in the Quran: “But the treaties are not dissolved with those Pagans with whom ye have entered into alliance and who have not subsequently failed you in aught, nor aided any one against you. So fulfill your engagements with them to the end of their term: for God loves the righteous” (Quran 9:4).

That said, the Quran takes a hardline approach toward those non-Muslims who are hostile, either through socioeconomic or military oppression, to the Muslim community. Especially in the last two years of the Prophet’s time in Medina, a number of verses of the Quran that are very uncompromising in tone were revealed. These verses command a political solution to a very significant problem at the time: the new Muslim state was vulnerable, and hostile forces stood ready to exploit any Muslim position of weakness in Arabia and beyond. Muslims were commanded to go after these hostile forces, whether they were pagan Arabs or from among the People of the Book, and to bring them under the authority of the Muslim state. They were to make a push to emerge victorious from long-standing hostilities, e.g., to “strike these forces down wherever you find them” (Quran 9:5) and cause them to recognize the political authority of the Muslim state (and desist their hostilities). However, it is important to recognize that even then, the Quran did not suggest that the hostile non-Muslims should be forced to convert to Islam. The Quran made a very clear distinction between the political issue—recognition of state authority—and the non-Muslims’ religious beliefs, which should not be opposed with force.

Despite this distinction in the Quran between political authority and personal belief, early Muslim theologians and jurists began to place expanded restrictions on non-Muslims within Muslim societies. For example, Muslims were often granted greater rights when giving evidence in court, extending the assumption of Muslim superiority within the state. Later, in some Muslim societies, other restrictions were introduced and often justified by various precedents. These restrictions included whether new places of worship could be built, whether church bells could be rung or scripture publically recited, and whether non-Muslims could publicly participate in practices that the Muslims considered forbidden, such as consuming alcohol or eating pork. Among other distinctions, some Muslims also considered whether non-Muslims should be able to build the same types of houses as Muslims or use the

same kinds of transportation. Although these restrictions are a part of historical and legal literature, it is not clear whether or how commonly they were put into practice. They may have existed in theory but were only used in a limited way, such as in times of uncertainty, difficulty, or tensions with an external enemy. Much depended on the political confidence of the state at the time and how secure it felt militarily. When the state felt insecure, it found it useful to resort to such restrictions to compensate for that weakness.

In most Muslim-majority states today, the state recognizes the freedom of non-Muslims to practice their religion, and non-Muslims are considered equal citizens. Most Muslim-majority nations have signed and ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which indicates that they accept freedom of religion for all citizens—at least in principle. Moreover, a number of Muslim-ruled states have written this principle into their constitutions—for instance, Oman in 1996<sup>15</sup> and Mali in 1992.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, discrimination against individuals on the basis of their religion or sect is prohibited in many countries. The Constitution of Bangladesh, for example, establishes Islam as the state religion but also recognizes individuals' rights to follow the religion of their choice.<sup>17</sup> This provision is generally respected in practice.<sup>18</sup> These and other examples indicate that many Muslim states have allowed religious minorities to retain, practice, and express their religious beliefs.

Despite this, many Muslim-majority states struggle with providing a legal, political, and social atmosphere of religious freedom. Most frequently, restrictions take the form of attempts to regulate apostasy or blasphemy (more about these below). The government of Malaysia, for example, both at the state and federal levels, forbids any non-Muslim to spread religious doctrine or belief among Muslims, either by persuasion or influence or by passing on publications about non-Islamic religions.<sup>19</sup> Such laws often silence nonviolent speech while appeasing segments of society ready to commit violence in reaction to social and religious controversy.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to laws, some Muslim communities harbor social hostilities toward religious freedom as well as high levels of ignorance about the teachings of the Quran and *hadith* (traditions attributed to the

Prophet) and of Muslim scholars' support of religious freedom. Such social hostilities frequently impinge on religious freedom not only for non-Muslims within Muslim-majority states but for fellow Muslims as well.

## Religious Freedom for Muslims

An understanding of the intersection of Islam and religious freedom must include consideration of religious freedom for Muslims themselves, not least of all in Muslim-majority societies. This is because religious freedom is at the heart of belief itself for Muslims.

The starting point for this discussion is an understanding that the Quran recognizes each individual's right to believe or not to believe in God, and that the Prophet Muhammad respected this right throughout his life. But even though the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad took a tolerant position, traditional Islamic law and theology developed a range of restrictions on this freedom in the post-prophetic period. The most notable occur in the following four areas: apostasy, blasphemy, heresy, and hypocrisy.

**1. Apostasy:** Historically, Islamic law defines apostasy (*riddah*) as the “unbelief of a Muslim who had earlier accepted Islam . . . of his [or her] own free-will”: “This acceptance occurs after one has acquired knowledge of the fundamentals of Islam and has made a commitment to abide by the rules of Islam.”<sup>21</sup> Thus an apostate is a Muslim who rejects Islam and/or converts to another religion. The majority of Muslim jurists have maintained that apostasy—the rejection of Islam by someone who has already been identified as a Muslim—is a “crime” that the Islamic state is to punish, and the penalty is death (though this is increasingly being questioned by Muslims). Modern apostasy laws seek to regulate an individual's identification with religion and punish mobility between different religions.

**2. Blasphemy:** Initially, the concept of blasphemy centered on prohibiting the use of foul language with respect to the Prophet Muhammad (*sabb al-rasul*). Later, this was extended to include foul language about Allah (*sabb Allah*), any of the angels, or other prophets. Anyone using such offensive language was considered a great sinner. According to

the unanimous view of the classical Muslim jurists, if the offence was committed by a Muslim, it constituted apostasy, punishable by death. If the offence was committed by a non-Muslim, it was considered blasphemy, also punishable by death if the person was living in an Islamic state. Modern blasphemy laws provide criminal penalties for statements or behavior deemed offensive with regard to religious sensibilities of Muslims. Such laws exist in a range of Muslim-majority countries, including Pakistan and Indonesia.

**3. Heresy:** The term “heretic” (*zindiq*) has been used in Islamic criminal law to describe, among others, a person whose teaching becomes a danger to the state. This also is a crime punishable by death, according to some scholars. However, it is difficult to find a unanimous view among Muslim jurists on the definition of *zindiq*. It often was associated with intellectual rebellion considered insulting to the Prophet’s honor, but it remains an ambiguous concept difficult to regulate by law.<sup>22</sup>

**4. Hypocrisy:** *Nifaq*, or religious hypocrisy, dates from the time of the Prophet. During the Medinan period (622–632 CE), Quranic revelation included many references to hypocrites (*munaḥiqun*) and hypocrisy (*nifaq*). The Quran repeatedly warns Muslims that hypocrites are a danger to the Muslim community. One verse commands the Prophet to engage in *jihad* against hypocrites and unbelievers engaged in hostilities;<sup>23</sup> other verses warn them of punishment in Hell.<sup>24</sup> However, there is no text in the Quran that orders Muslims to kill hypocrites or says that they should be punished by death. Some jurists nevertheless justified the punishment of death for hypocrites.<sup>25</sup>

Although scholars of Islamic law and theology often discuss these four concepts of apostasy, blasphemy, heresy, and hypocrisy, early jurists generally did not attempt to differentiate among them clearly; they often, for instance, included hypocrisy and heresy within the broader concept of apostasy.<sup>26</sup> A Muslim accused of religious dissent could thus be referred to as an apostate, blasphemer, heretic, hypocrite, or even an unbeliever. Because these terms and concepts are often used interchangeably, I will focus on the concept of apostasy as the most important in any discussion of religious freedom within the framework of Islamic law.

### *Apostasy in Islamic Law*

As explained earlier, the Quran contains many verses, revealed in both the Meccan and Medinan periods, that uphold the right to freedom of religion. However, it views conversion from Islam to another religion with profound dismay. On a number of occasions, it declares that those who move away from the true path of God and the Prophet will be condemned and punished with hellfire in life after death. However, in line with its view of individual and personal responsibility for matters of belief and religion, the Quran does not force Muslims to remain Muslims if they want to convert to their former religions, or any religion. The Quran considers that such persons are committing a grave sin that deserves punishment in the life to come,<sup>27</sup> yet it foresees a natural death for them in this life. Indeed, there is no verse of the Quran that specifies any kind of punishment in this life for converting from Islam, let alone death.<sup>28</sup> Similarly there is no evidence that the Prophet Muhammad himself ever imposed the death penalty on an apostate for the simple act of conversion from Islam.<sup>29</sup> However, many scholars have interpreted certain hadith to suggest that converts from Islam should be punished with death.

Aside from the question of punishment, Muslim juristic and theological thought about what even constitutes apostasy is very fluid and not always clear-cut. Some scholars would only label another Muslim an apostate if the person had admitted to apostasy or had done something that Muslims in general would view as leaving the community of Islam (such as cursing God or the Prophet). Other schools of thought may label another Muslim an apostate for the slightest unorthodox remark, such as saying mockingly, “I don’t know what true faith is”<sup>30</sup> or expressing a view that could be considered “hating” an aspect of Islam. A large number of so-called apostasy lists (which detail how a Muslim may become an apostate) exist today that were developed by different Muslim sects, groups, and schools of thought. There is no general agreement among Muslims on the validity of the contents of these lists.

In Islamic legal tradition, whether or not a Muslim is an apostate has been determined in two ways. First, confession or admission is one

of the most important forms of evidence in Islamic law. If a person admits to no longer having Islamic faith, that is sufficient for conviction. Second, the testimony of two upright witnesses to anti-Islamic speech or behavior also is enough, but different schools of law have different standards for the testimony they will accept. For example, the Hanafi jurists require that the witnesses be questioned and investigated by a judge to ensure they have correctly interpreted the statements or activity of the accused.<sup>31</sup> Others, such as the Malikis, say that the testimony of the witnesses should be even more fully investigated due to the seriousness of the offence.<sup>32</sup>

Other conditions must be met to determine that a Muslim has become an apostate. First, the person who commits apostasy must commit it voluntarily, without being compelled to do so. Second, the person must be of sound mind (*'aqil*) and not legally insane (*majnun*). The apostasy of a legally insane person is not valid (neither is his or her Islam).

The jurists unanimously agree that the apostasy of a minor who does not understand the meaning of apostasy and of Islam is not valid. But jurists have two different views about a minor who *can* comprehend these meanings yet still commits an offense leading to apostasy. For Shafi'is, the minor's apostasy is not valid; but for Malikis, Hanbalis, and some Hanafis, the apostasy of the minor is valid. They argue that if the minor's profession of Islam is valid, so is their apostasy. However, according to the Hanafi jurists Abu Hanifa (d. 767 CE) and Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Shaybani (d. 805 CE), a minor should not be executed or beaten but instead be instructed to accept Islam.<sup>33</sup>

All jurists believe that both men and women can become apostates. In the case of married couples, according to Malikis and Hanafis, if one of the spouses becomes an apostate, the couple should be separated. As for any children born before the parent's apostasy, they are considered Muslim and cannot be allowed to follow their parent into apostasy.<sup>34</sup>

### *Apostasy in the Quran*

Let us remember that while the Quran condemns apostasy in no uncertain terms, it does not provide any worldly penalty for it. See,



for example, Quran 4:90, 5:59, and 16:108. These verses all condemn the apostate in very harsh and clear terms but, importantly, without prescribing a worldly punishment.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, verses such as Quran 2:218 and 3:86–97 clearly speak of a natural death for the apostate.<sup>36</sup> Quran 4:137 seems to offer a strong argument against the death penalty for apostasy, as it mentions apostates who repeatedly committed the offense, but no death penalty for them is indicated: “Those who believe, then disbelieve, then believe again, then disbelieve and then increase in their disbelief—God will never forgive them nor guide them to the path.”

In his book *Punishment of Apostasy in Islam*, S.A. Rahman, the former chief justice of Pakistan, draws attention to the fact that the Quran is silent on the question of death as the punishment for apostasy, even though the subject of apostasy occurs no less than twenty times within it.<sup>37</sup> Selim el-Awa, a well-known jurist from Egypt who discusses the issue of apostasy at length, agrees, adding that the evidence in the Sunnah is open to interpretation.<sup>38</sup> Mahmud Shaltut analysed the relevant evidence in the Quran and concluded that apostasy carries no penalty in this world. For him, the Quran speaks only of punishment in the hereafter.<sup>39</sup>

### *Apostasy in Hadith*

Historical support for the death penalty for apostasy is usually found not in the Quran but in hadith. Jurists often cite the hadith that says, “Whoever changes his religion, kill him”<sup>40</sup> and similar texts in support of their position. A number of these texts are in hadith collections that Sunni Muslims consider authentic, such as those of Bukhari and Muslim.

One problem is that those hadith that appear to support the death penalty for apostasy and are attributed to the Prophet Muhammad seem to contradict many Quranic texts on religious freedom. Some Muslim scholars have argued that those verses of the Quran that support religious freedom have been “abrogated” (i.e., repealed). However, there are close to one hundred verses in the Quran that broadly support religious freedom. The sheer number of such Quran verses undermines the argument that these verses can be abrogated by just a few opposing hadith.

The hadith that are most often quoted in support of the death penalty are also problematic in other ways. For example, the hadith “Whoever changes his religion, kill him” is notably general, and its meaning is ambiguous. If one takes this hadith literally, anyone who converts from any religion can be killed in an Islamic state. This would also include, for example, a Hindu who converts to Christianity, or even a Christian who converts to Islam. Such a position would obviously be absurd. Early Muslim jurists frequently encountered this kind of ambiguity in Quranic and hadith texts and were often quite comfortable with interpreting or reinterpreting them or favoring certain texts over others. Such ambiguity provided much room for jurists to interpret texts in specific ways or to restrict their scope of meaning.

Of course, the concept of textual ambiguity—more than one possible meaning in a text—is not new. In fact, it has been central to the development of Islamic law. Prominent jurists, including Abu Hanifa, Malik, and Shafi‘i, at times had to set aside certain texts and rely on others in their legal decisions. Ambiguous texts had to be clarified or interpreted. General texts also had to be given a more particular interpretation. Even some of the earliest Islamic works on the principles of jurisprudence, such as Shafi‘i’s *Risala*, use this concern; for instance, his analysis of *bayān* (roughly translated as “making clear the meaning” of the substance of Quranic communication).<sup>41</sup> The Islamic legal tradition provides tools to deal with textual ambiguity, and some contemporary Muslim scholars argue that we need to develop and apply these ideas further. This is an area where contemporary Muslim scholars have much to contribute.

A second problem is that, although hadith are a critically important part of Islam’s tradition, they also need to be approached with care and some degree of caution. Hadith collectors and scholars in the early centuries of Islam have provided us with the results of their work in determining the authenticity and reliability of hadith, but Muslims today, building on this, need to develop further ideas and methodological tools. In some cases, it may be necessary to question the authenticity of some hadith that early scholars deemed authentic. For instance, although the hadith “Whoever changes his religion, kill him” exists in the collection of Bukhari, there are some questions about whether certain people who took part in transmitting it are reliable—at least in

the most well-known version of the hadith. That version is attributed to the famous cousin of the Prophet, Ibn Abbas. It was narrated by his freed slave Ikrima and popularized by a student of Ikrima, Ayyub al-Sukhtiyani, in the second century of Islam.<sup>42</sup> In hadith scholarship, the role of Ikrima as a key source of this hadith raises some questions about its authenticity. Some notably senior scholars who were contemporaries of Ikrima considered him to be a liar. For example, Ali b. Abd Allah b. Abbas (the son of Ibn Abbas, to whom Ikrima attributed this hadith) accused Ikrima of lying about his father, Ibn Abbas. Similarly, Sa'id b. Jubayr viewed Ikrima unfavorably, as did Sa'id b. al-Musayyab, who apparently told his slave, "Do not tell lies about me, as Ikrima tells lies about Ibn Abbas."<sup>43</sup> Although Bukhari accepted hadith narrated by Ikrima, the other equally important hadith scholar, whose name was Muslim, did not. Thus, there is evidence to suggest that Ikrima was unreliable and that his version of the hadith can be questioned. Admittedly, there are several versions of this hadith, but most are considered "weak."<sup>44</sup> This means that the authenticity of Ikrima's version can be placed under considerable suspicion—and this is the version quoted most often to support the death penalty for apostasy.<sup>45</sup>

### *Historical Tolerance of Dissent in Muslim Societies*

It is important to note the surprisingly high level of religious tolerance in early Muslim societies to highlight the fact that restrictive interpretations were not the only ones that found favor with the early generations of Muslims.

Many examples exist of the tolerance of a range of views, including unorthodox views, in the midst of Muslim societies. Abu al-Ala' al-Ma'arri (d. 1058), the famous poet, attacked key Islamic beliefs and practices of religion in his poetry, yet he lived his life unharmed and died a natural death. Among his sayings critical of religion include the following:

They all err—Muslims, Jews,  
Christians, and Zoroastrians.  
Humanity follows two world-wide sects:

One, man intelligent without religion,  
The second, religious without intellect.<sup>46</sup>

His attacks on religious practices can also be easily discerned:

O fools, awake! The rites you sacred hold  
Are but a cheat contrived by men of old,  
Who lusted after wealth and gained their lust  
And died in baseness—and their law is dust.<sup>47</sup>

The free-thinking philosopher, physician, and alchemist Muhammad b. Zakariyya al-Razi (d. 925 or 935) also publicized his equally unorthodox—some would say heretical—views and lived among Muslims unharmed. Even a revered theologian such as al-Ghazali (d. 1111), whose ideas were controversial during certain periods of his later life, remained unharmed. These are only a few of the many examples of tolerance in early Muslim societies. Needless to say, in Muslim history intolerance of dissent also exists, and at certain times of history such intolerance was very visible in some Muslim societies.

### *Varieties of Tolerance and Intolerance Among Muslim States*

Even though today many Muslim-ruled states find apostasy objectionable, not all of them approach this issue in the same way. Some Muslim-ruled states do not allow the proselytizing of other religions to Muslims. Such states also prohibit Muslims from abandoning Islam and severely punish those who do so. In Yemen, for instance, a Muslim's conversion to another religion is punishable by death. Other states, however, allow some leeway for these kinds of activities. In Morocco, voluntary conversion from Islam to another religion may not be punished, although any attempt to persuade a Muslim to convert is illegal. In Malaysia, the government seems to be taking the position that apostates will not face punishment as long as they do not insult Islam. In Iran and Oman, proselytizing to Muslims by non-Muslims is treated suspiciously or is prohibited.

## **Why Muslims Need Not Fear Religious Freedom**

1. The Quran and the Prophet Muhammad's Practice  
Provide a Strong Argument in Favor of Religious Freedom
2. Religious Freedom Is in the Interest of Muslims  
and Their Societies
3. Muslim Scholars Support Religious Freedom

Within Muslim societies, debates on the right to religious freedom are underway, and people are taking various positions. At one end of the spectrum are the Muslim-majority countries and minority-Muslim communities in diverse societies that seek total freedom to practice other religions and fully accept the ideals expressed in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). At the other end are countries where the state does not allow religions other than Islam to function at all, social hostility to other religions is high, and the conversion of Muslims to other faiths is punishable by death (also there are minority-Muslim communities where social hostility toward freedom of religion is strong). Between these two extremes are those who place some restrictions on the religious freedom of their citizens. These can take various forms, like strictly regulating the construction of places of worship; prohibiting importation of religious items; disallowing proselytization of non-Muslim religions; outlawing or restricting certain Muslim schools of thought, organizations, or activities; and banning the use of certain Islamic symbols or words by non-Muslims. But of course, as discussed, apostasy is still the most policed offense.

A great many Muslims find the issue of the right to leave Islam challenging. They admit that the Quran and Sunnah recognize freedom of conscience and the right to worship and practice other religions, but still they do not support the right to leave Islam.<sup>48</sup> From their point of view, Islam is the true and final religion, and turning away from it to another belief system that is by definition false cannot be tolerated. Moreover, because salvation is the most important objective for a human being, all attempts should be made to keep the person within the fold

of Islam—the only true path to salvation, from their point of view. Yet belief in Islam *requires* fidelity to the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, so these sources warrant closer examination.

### ***1. The Quran and the Prophet Muhammad's Practice Provide a Strong Argument in Favor of Religious Freedom***

Although religion and belief in One God are clearly asserted in the Quran as a human good, it does not present all human beings as following this path. In fact, the Quran leaves much space for human beings to reject religion if they wish and to follow what they desire. It provides for free will right from the creation of the first human beings. Adam and Eve are said to have been given this free will, through which God tested them. They failed this first test, but from a Quranic point of view, their failure did not lead to the profound fall of the human race. Rather the Quran presents free will and testing as part of God's plan for human beings—one of the reasons they were created. In fact, it is free will that gives them a higher place in the order of creation. An essential part of this free will and testing is the freedom to choose whether or not to believe in God and His religion.

This choice is also about responsibility. Human beings are responsible for what they do or fail to do on earth. Part of this is having belief in the One God, following God's commandments and prohibitions, and following the ethical-moral code that God has conveyed through His prophets. A person's success or failure depends upon how he or she fulfills this responsibility. From a Quranic point of view, the result is everlasting happiness in Paradise or eternal damnation in Hell. Thus, while the freedom to believe or not to believe is given, it is also associated with weighty consequences. Significantly, the weighty consequences referred to in the Quran are ultimately not of this world but take place in the afterlife.

Theologically, the Quran views every human being as a unique creation of God, blessed with intellect and free will. It says that God created humans "in the best of moulds" (Quran 95:4), honored them, and gave them special favors (see Quran 17:70). It emphasizes that

human beings have inherent worth and dignity and that God gave them the intellect and ability to discern between right and wrong (see Quran 2:256) as well as the personal autonomy to consider religious options for themselves. For example, “Let him who wills believe in it [Islam], and let him who wills, reject it” (Quran 18:29) and “Whoever chooses to follow the right path, follows it for his own good; and if any one wills to go astray, say [O’ Prophet, to him] ‘I am only a warner’” (Quran 27:92). This is a declaration often attributed to prophets and repeated in the Quran.

In addition, a vast array of Quran verses specify clearly that the question of faith and belief is a personal matter between an individual and God. It states, “Whoever is guided is only guided for the benefit of his soul. And whoever errs only errs against it. And no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another” (Quran 17:15).

The Quran warns that ultimately God will hold individuals accountable for the choices they make during their lifetime. On the Day of Judgment, people will stand before God and be questioned about what they did or failed to do and how they treated others. This means that salvation, like belief, is an individual effort, not a collective or community matter. God reminded Prophet Muhammad that even he was not responsible for the decisions of others; he was advised to say, “To me [shall be accounted] my doing, and to you, your doings: you are not accountable for what I am doing, and I am not accountable for whatever you do” (Quran 10:41).

One of the most crucial ways the Quran affirms an individual’s autonomy and freedom to choose is by making a stand against the use of force in matters of faith. The Quran states plainly that no one should force others to believe:

There shall be no coercion in matters of faith. Distinct has now become the right way from [the way of] error: hence, he who rejects the powers of evil and believes in God has indeed taken hold of a support most unfailing, which shall never give way: for God is all-hearing, all-knowing (Quran 2:256).

In other verses, the Quran emphasizes that no one should be forced to follow a particular religion or belief. For the Quran, forced belief is totally unacceptable. A person can truly come to Islam only through conviction and genuine belief. The Quran encourages Muslims to invite others to Islam “in the way that is best” (Quran 29:46), using courteous advice, sound reasoning, and elegant persuasion<sup>49</sup> rather than argumentation. Correct faith comes from certitude and conviction, so the Quran denounces practices and attitudes that promote blind imitation of ancestral practices instead of independent thought and personal conviction (e.g., Quran 2:170).

Equally important is the Prophet Muhammad’s own practice. Although there are some hadith in support of the death penalty for apostasy, these contradict the Prophet Muhammad’s actual *actions*. Conversion from Islam certainly existed in the Prophet’s time. In fact, several Muslims left Islam immediately after the reported famous “night journey” of the Prophet to Jerusalem and then to heaven (known as *Isra’* and *Mi’raj*). These people questioned how the Prophet could claim that he went to Jerusalem and then back to Mecca in one night, as people typically spent weeks on this journey. Similarly, some Muslims migrated to Abyssinia when the persecution of Muslims in Mecca became unbearable, and some of these apostatized and became Christians.<sup>50</sup>

The Quran also makes many references to hypocrisy (*nifaaq*) and to hypocrites (*munafiqun*) in Medina who were, for all practical purposes, apostates. Interestingly, none were put to death, and there is no evidence that the Prophet ordered—or even considered—the killing of any person simply because of a change of faith.

## **2. Religious Freedom Is in the Interest of Muslims and Their Societies**

The international community recognizes that freedom of religion and belief has an important role to play in fostering peace and ensuring social justice. For example, the United Nations’ Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief affirms, “Freedom of religion and belief should also contribute to the attainment of the goals of world peace, social justice and friendship among peoples.”<sup>51</sup>



Some governments of Muslim-majority countries, however, argue that restrictions on religious freedom are necessary to maintain public order and to prevent violence between religious groups. Yet the opposite usually proves to be true. States that restrict religious freedom in the name of stability often create the very conditions that they are trying to prevent; this is because repression tends to legitimize and even foster a culture of discrimination and also can radicalize those individuals and groups who are being repressed.<sup>52</sup>

A study conducted by Brian Grim and Roger Finke (2007) demonstrated that an understanding of social conflict cannot ignore the unique role of religion, especially when investigating religious persecution. Specifically, their research found that *social hostilities* and *government regulation* offer a strong explanation for variations in the levels of *religious persecution* found in societies. Government regulation of religion was the strongest predictor of religious persecution, even when controlling for other possible explanations, including religious homogeneity, armed conflict, population growth, and income inequality. These results support an explanation that attempts to regulate faith contribute to a culture that represses dissent from government-stipulated orthodoxy. And this can set up a vicious cycle of persecution.<sup>53</sup> More regulation leads to increased persecution, which in turn means less order and more violence.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, authors such as Thomas Walsh find that freedom of religion is consistent with other freedoms and in fact serves to bolster the existence of other freedoms.<sup>55</sup>

There is also a strong connection between restriction of religious freedom and the extent of militarization and conflict in a country. In countries with less religious freedom, a greater share of the GDP tends to be spent on the military.<sup>56</sup> *Foreign Policy* magazine's 2007 Failed States Index finds, "Freedom of worship . . . may . . . be a key indicator of stability. Vulnerable states display a greater degree of religious intolerance."<sup>57</sup>

Not least of all, religious freedom encourages authentic belief. When individuals are free to choose their religious beliefs instead of being forced by legal restrictions or social pressures, their assent to faith is more likely to be genuine, honest before God and others. Faith chosen freely at the individual level without coercion and without forced conformity is genuine faith.<sup>58</sup> This is particularly significant for Muslims

because the Quran condemns hypocrisy. In light of this it seems worth considering that a system such as the threat of death for apostasy might encourage people to think that lying about belief—being hypocrites—would be preferable to admitting to loss of faith.

### ***3. Muslim Scholars Support Religious Freedom***

Even though the issue of apostasy is still of great concern in Muslim-majority states, many are choosing to eliminate the death penalty for apostasy. Many Muslims strongly defend the death penalty, but increasingly other Muslims oppose it with equal vigor—this group includes some prominent Muslim thinkers. Thus, an increasing number are moving away from the notion of an enforced religion to that of personal assent between an individual and God. This perspective is probably closer to the Quranic idea of noncoercion in matters of faith and religion.

There is also an increasing amount of scholarship that questions the basis of apostasy laws and the associated death penalty. A number of today's Muslim thinkers have reexamined the texts associated with the punishment for apostasy, demonstrating that there is no Quranic basis for the death penalty. Equally, there is no practice of the Prophet to support the death penalty for apostasy. In their view, to the extent that the death penalty was found during the time of the Prophet as a punishment for apostasy, it generally occurred at times when the crime was tantamount to a political act of treason, not just a change of faith. By contrast, a change of faith in the context of modern nation-states does not equate at all to political treason.

In the modern period, Muslim thinkers such as Ahmad Khan, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Muhammad Iqbal were among the earliest to provide the basic framework that made it possible to question the classical conception of apostasy and the death penalty. In the twenty-first century, even a number of leading political Islamists such as Rashid Ghannushi have joined the call for religious freedom for all, including religious freedom for Muslims.

After analyzing the relevant texts of the Quran on apostasy, S.A. Rahman argued,

The position that emerges, after a survey of the relevant verses of the Quran, may be summed up by saying that not only is there no punishment for apostasy provided in the Book but that the Word of God clearly envisages the natural death of the apostate. He will be punished only in the Hereafter.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, after a thorough analysis of the texts available, he had this to say about the hadith evidence:

It has been seen that even the strongest bulwark of the orthodox view, viz. the Sunnah, when subjected to critical examination in the light of history, does not fortify the stand of those who seek to establish that a Muslim who commits apostasy must be condemned to death for his change of belief alone. In instances in which apparently such a punishment was inflicted, other factors have been found to co-exist, which would have justified action in the interest of collective security.<sup>60</sup>

One of the Muslims who argues that there is no temporal punishment for simple apostasy is the late Mahmud Shaltut, a leading Egyptian scholar and the sheikh of al-Azhar from 1958 to 1963. For Shaltut, the punishment of death in early Islamic history was really punishment for crimes against the state. He further argues that the punishment for apostasy is based largely on one hadith and that prescribed punishments (*hudud*) cannot be established on a solitary (*ahad*) hadith. For him, unbelief itself is not a justification for the punishment.<sup>61</sup>

Several other Muslim scholars of the modern period also have argued that the punishment of death is more about preventing political crimes than religious ones. Subhi Mahmassani, the well-known legal scholar, claims that the death penalty is connected to high treason—i.e., to politics—not to the simple act of renunciation of faith.<sup>62</sup> Mohammad Hashim Kamali of Malaysia also argues,

It may be said by way of conclusion that apostasy was a punishable offence in the early years of the advent of Islam due to its subversive effects on the nascent Muslim community and state. Evidence in the Quran is on the other hand clearly supportive of the freedom of belief, which naturally includes freedom to convert. Moreover the Quran provides no punishment for apostasy despite the fact that it occurs in a large number of places in the text, and this remains to represent the normative position of the Shari'ah on non-subversive apostasy that is due purely to personal conviction and belief.<sup>63</sup>

Confirming this view, Kamali says, "The Quran prescribes absolutely no temporal punishment for apostasy, nor has the Prophet, peace be upon him, sentenced anyone to death for it."<sup>64</sup>

Muhammad Salim al-Awa, a contemporary thinker, introduces an element of flexibility by arguing that the punishment is not a prescribed punishment (*hadd*) but a discretionary punishment (*ta'zir*). The difference is that if the punishment is prescribed, it cannot be changed, but if it is a discretionary punishment, it can be changed from time to time in agreement with the principles developed in Islamic law. Awa disagrees with the common view among traditional Muslim jurists that Islam unequivocally prescribes the death penalty for apostasy.<sup>65</sup> He argues, "The Quranic verses concerned did not prescribe any punishment for apostasy but simply declared it to be a great sin. Secondly, the Prophet who said these words "Whoever changes his religion kill him" about apostates never himself had an apostate put to death."<sup>66</sup>

For the late Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, sheikh of al-Azhar from 1996 to 2010, Muslims who renounce their faith or turn apostate should be left alone as long as they do not pose a threat or belittle Islam. If Muslims are forced to take action against an apostate, he said, it should not be because the person has given up the faith but because he or she turned out to be an enemy or a threat to Muslim society.<sup>67</sup>

Shabbir Akhtar emphasizes the importance of sincerity in belief and argues that faith should not be based on hypocrisy and coercion:

The availability of religious freedom, then, effectively presupposes the need to countenance desertion from the scripted society. Whether or not we Muslims should allow individuals in the Muslim community to exercise free reflective choice is, of course, itself a matter for considered judgment. And, of course, it is a matter of great moment. My own view . . . is that the potential risks inherent in the offer of religious freedom are worth taking. Why? Well, if there is a God, I would argue, it can be expected a priori that he wants a voluntary response born of genuine gratitude and humility themselves rooted in reflection and morally responsible choice. Seen in this light, heresy and even apostasy are morally more acceptable than any hypocritical attachment to orthodox opinion out of the fear of public sanctions. Fortunately, for us, we have the evidence of the Koran itself in favour of this view: “there should be no compulsion in religion” ([Quran] 2:256). Unfortunately, however, many learned authorities have sought to cancel this noble sentiment by finding verses within the sacred volume that favour the opposite opinion. . . . Suffice it to say here that even in terms of a pragmatic (as opposed to a moral or religious) outlook, there is much to be said in favour of religious freedom.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

The ability of a person to believe freely is central to the Quranic idea of true belief. Forced conversions, coercion to keep an individual bound to a particular religion, and religious hypocrisy are condemned in the Quran. The Quran consistently supported freedom to believe throughout the Prophet's mission (610–632 CE), and the Prophet Muhammad himself unwaveringly upheld this value. Despite the many restrictions that have emerged for both Muslims and non-Muslims in the course of the development of Muslim theology and law in the post-prophetic period, the realities of the modern world are forcing Muslim thinkers and scholars to rethink such restrictions and argue for religious freedom for all. In doing so, these Muslims are coming closer to the teachings of the Quran and the actual practice of Prophet Muhammad.

In preparing for a future in which Muslims coexist across the globe side by side with others (sometimes as a minority and sometimes as the majority), Muslims need to find peace with religious freedom in light of both Islamic legal history and modern sociopolitical realities. My hope is that this essay will contribute to greater understanding and acceptance of religious freedom by Muslims. A push to open wider the doors of religious freedom is not an attempt to minimize the importance of religion, but rather to ensure its protection from both the whims of political fancy and the violent gusts of extremism.

## Notes

1. See Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Freedom of Expression in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Berita, 1994), 99.
2. See Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed, *Freedom of Religion: Apostasy and Islam*, (Hants: Ashgate, 2004), 21.
3. See, e.g., Quran 2:75, 2:100–101, 2:146, 3:23, 3:78, 5:68–86.
4. *Full Text of the Madina* [sic] *Charter*, <http://www.constitution.org/cons/medina/macharter.htm> (accessed Nov. 15, 2011), article 30.
5. See Rachel M. Scott, “Contextual Citizenship in Modern Islamic Thought” *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 18(1) (2007):1–18, p. 3.
6. *Ibid.*
7. See Aibek Ahmedov, “Religious Minorities and Apostasy in Early Islamic States: Legal and Historical Analysis of Sources” *Journal of Islamic State Practices in International Law* 2(3) (2006):1–17, p. 8.
8. *Ibid.*
9. See Ahmad Yousif, “Islam, Minorities and Religious Freedom: A Challenge to Modern Theory of Pluralism,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 20(1) (2000): 29–41, p. 37.
10. Mohammad Hashim Kamali, “Freedom of Religion in Islamic Law,” *Capital University Law Review* 21(1) (1992):63–82, p. 70.
11. “The Covenant of Umar,” *MidEast Web*, <http://www.mideastweb.org/covenantofumar.htm> (accessed Sept. 2, 2010).
12. Quoted in Ahmedov, “Religious Minorities,” 9.
13. Scott, “Contextual Citizenship,” 3.
14. See *ibid.*
15. “Basic Statute of the State,” chapter 3, article 17 (1996): “All citizens are equal before the Law and share the same public rights and duties. There is no discrimination between them on the ground of . . . religion, sect.”
16. “The Constitution of Republic of Mali,” title 1, article 4 (1992): “Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, worship, opinion, expression, and creation in respect to the law.”
17. “Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh,” part 1, clause 2A (1971): “The state religion . . . is Islam, but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in the Republic.” Also part 3, clause 28(1) : “The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion.”
18. See U.S. Department of State, *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom*, 1999, 2001, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2001> (accessed March 29, 2010).
19. See for example, section 4, *Control and Restriction of The Propagation of Non-Islamic Religions Among Muslims, (Negeri Sembilan) Bill* (1991).
20. See Asma Uddin, “Blasphemy Laws in Muslim Majority Countries,” *Review of Faith and International Affairs* (Summer 2011): 1–9, p. 3, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1885757>.

21. Abd al-Rahman al-Jaziri, *Min Kitab al-Fiqh `ala al-Madhahib al-Arba`ah*, vol. 5, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, n.d., 422–423.
22. H.A.R Gibb and J.H. Kramers, “Zindik,” *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1953), 659.
23. See Quran 9:73.
24. See, e.g., Quran 9:68.
25. See Jaziri, *Min Kitab al-Fiqh `ala al-Madhahib al-Arba`ah*, 5:428.
26. See Kamali, *Freedom of Expression*, 208–209.
27. See Quran 63:3.
28. See Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Islamic Law in Malaysia: Issues and Developments* (Kuala Lumpur: Ilmiah, 2000), 209.
29. See Kamali, *Freedom of Expression*, 91, citing S.A. Rahman, *Punishment of Apostasy in Islam*, 2nd ed. (Lahore, Pakistan: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1978), 63–64.
30. See Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller: A Classic Manual of Islamic Sacred Law*, trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller (Evanston: Sunnah, 1994), 596–598.
31. See Saeed and Saeed, *Freedom of Religion*, 52, citing Abd al-Rahman al-Jaziri, *Min Kitab al-Fiqh `ala al-Madhahib al-Arba`ah* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Fikr, n.d.), 5:437.
32. See Saeed and Saeed, 52.
33. See Ibid.
34. See Ibid, 53.
35. See Turgut Subasi, “The Apostasy Question in the Context of Anglo-Ottoman Relations, 1843–44,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 38(2) (2002), 2, citing S.M. Zwemer, *The Law of Apostasy in Islam* (London: Marshall Brothers, 1924).
36. See Rudolph Peters and Gert J.J. De Vries, “Apostasy in Islam,” *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series, 17(1) (1976–1977): 1–25, p. 14.
37. See Kamali, *Freedom of Expression*, 91.
38. See ibid, citing Mohamed Selim El-Awa, *Punishment in Islamic Law* (Indianapolis, IN: American Trust, 1982), 55.
39. See Kamali, *Freedom of Expression*, 91.
40. This hadith is included in the collection of Bukhari.
41. See Imam Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi’i, *al-Risala fi Usul al-Fiqh (Treatise on the Foundations of Islamic Jurisprudence)*, trans. Majid Khadduri (Cambridge, England: Islamic Texts Society, 2008), 67.
42. See Al-Alwani, *La Ikraha fi al-Din*. Cairo: Maktab al-Shuruq, 2006), 123. [The English translation of this is Taha Jabir Alalwani, *Apostasy in Islam: A Historical and Scriptural Analysis*. (London and Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2011), translated by Nancy Roberts, p. 78.]
43. Ibid., 127. [In English translation, p. 79]
44. Ibid.
45. See ibid., 123–139. [In English translation, pp. 78-89]



46. Al-Ma'arri, "The Two Universal Sects," undated, [http://www.humanistictexts.org/al\\_ma%27arri.htm](http://www.humanistictexts.org/al_ma%27arri.htm).
47. Al-Ma'arri, "The Cheat of Sacred Rites," undated, [http://www.humanistictexts.org/al\\_ma%27arri.htm](http://www.humanistictexts.org/al_ma%27arri.htm).
48. See Kamali, *Islamic Law in Malaysia*, 203–219.
49. See Kamali, *Freedom of Expression*, 100.
50. See Al-Alwani, *La Ikraha fi al-Din*, 101–104. [In English translation, pp. 42ff.]
51. Preamble, Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981), <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/d4deidrb.htm>.
52. See Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: Norton, 2011).
53. See Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, "Religious Persecution in Cross-National Context: Clashing Civilizations or Regulated Religious Economies?" *American Sociological Review* 72(4) (August 2007): 633–658, [http://sitemaker.umich.edu/comparative.speaker.series/files/roger\\_finke.pdf](http://sitemaker.umich.edu/comparative.speaker.series/files/roger_finke.pdf) (draft text), 34–35.
54. See Grim and Finke, "Religious Persecution in Cross-National Context," 654. See also Brian J. Grim, "God's Economy: Religious Freedom & Socio-Economic Wellbeing," based on *Religious Freedom in the World*, Center for Religious Freedom, survey (2008), presented at "World Trends in Religious Freedom," Hudson Institute, Washington, D.C. (July 9, 2007), 2, [crf.hudson.org/articledocs/GodsEconomy.doc](http://crf.hudson.org/articledocs/GodsEconomy.doc).
55. See Thomas Walsh, "Religious Freedom and the Moral Society," presented at "Religious Freedom and the New Millennium," International Coalition for Religious Freedom, Washington, D.C. (April 17–19, 1998), [http://www.religiousfreedom.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=380&Itemid=57](http://www.religiousfreedom.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=380&Itemid=57).
56. See Grim, "God's Economy," 2.
57. As quoted in "Study Shows Religious Freedom for Others Benefits Us All," *The O Project* (July 14, 2007), blog post, <http://oproject.wordpress.com/2007/07/14/religious-freedom>.
58. The European Court of Human Rights, for example, confirmed this view when it recognized that freedom of religion is "one of the most vital elements that go to make up the identity of believers and their conception of life." (European Court of Human Rights, *Kokkinakis v. Greece*, chamber judgment, deliberated November 27, 1992 and April 19, 1993; decision issued May 25, 1993.)
59. S.A. Rahman, *Punishment of Apostasy in Islam*, 2nd ed. (Lahore, Pakistan: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1978), 54.
60. *Ibid.*, 85–86.
61. See Mahmud Shaltut, *Al-Islam: 'Aqidah wa Shari'ah* (Kuwait: Matabi' Dar al-Qalam, n.d.), 292–293.
62. See Subhi Mahmassani, *Arkan Huquq al-Insan fi al-Islam* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Ilm li al-Malayin, 1979), 123–124.
63. Kamali, *Islamic Law in Malaysia*, 219.

64. Kamali, *Islamic Law in Malaysia*, 209.
65. See Awa, *Punishment in Islamic Law*, 50.
66. Awa, *Punishment in Islamic Law*, 54.
67. "The Grand Imams of Al-Azhar (Shuyukhul Azhar)," "Shaykh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi (1928– )," [http://www.sunnah.org/history/Scholars/mashaykh\\_azhar.htm#tantawi](http://www.sunnah.org/history/Scholars/mashaykh_azhar.htm#tantawi) (accessed January 31, 2002).
68. Shabbir Akhtar, *A Faith for All Seasons: Islam and Western Modernity* (London: Bellew 1990), 21–22. See also Shabbir Akhtar, *Be Careful with Muhammad! The Salman Rushdie Affair* (London: Bellew, 1989), 70–77 for a longer discourse on apostasy (and blasphemy and treason).



Islam and religious freedom: are they compatible or on a collision course? Abdullah Saeed examines Islamic teachings in the Quran and in the Hadith regarding the status of religious minorities living in Muslim-majority societies and he surveys the perspectives of major Muslim scholars around the world today on whether or not Islam and religious freedom can coexist. In addition he considers whether Muslim societies stand to benefit or face a threat from religious freedom, not least of all the freedom to explore and debate their own faith. Saeed finds that “[d]espite the many restrictions that have emerged for both Muslims and non-Muslims in the course of the development of Muslim theology and law in the post-prophetic period, the realities of the modern world are forcing Muslim thinkers and scholars to rethink such restrictions and argue for religious freedom for all. In doing so, these Muslims are coming closer to the teachings of the Quran and the actual practice of Prophet Muhammad.”

There is perhaps no issue more important for contemporary Muslim thought than the freedom of religion. It influences attitudes on conflict, citizenship, and rights in an increasingly pluralistic world. Abdullah Saeed, in this short booklet, raises key questions from scripture, theology, law, history, and politics, providing a comprehensive background as well as courageous leadership for the future development of Muslim thought.

—Mahan Mirza, Zaytuna College

Human rights reform in the Muslim world requires a deep grounding in Islamic theology. *Islam and Belief* is an important contribution to this vital project.

—Asma Uddin, founder and editor-in-chief,  
[www.AltMuslimah.com](http://www.AltMuslimah.com)

The question of the freedom of belief remains a crucial question worldwide, and this book provides a succinct and informative reflection on Islam and pluralism.

—Jonathan A.C. Brown, Georgetown University

For more about Muslim perspectives on religious freedom see:

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