



Samuel Gregg: Religious Freedom and the Arab Spring



posted by [Kenneth Spence](#) on Friday, October 14, 2011

Acton’s director of research Samuel Gregg tackles the question of religious liberty in Islamic states this morning, over at The American Spectator. [In a piece titled “The Arab Spring’s Forgotten Freedom,”](#) Gregg describes the tensions between Christians seeking religious freedom in the Middle East and the Islamic states they inhabit, and then looks hopefully to the source of a resolution.

For at least one group of Middle-Easterners, the Arab Spring is turning out to be a decidedly wintery affair. And if confirmation was ever needed, just consider the escalation of naked violence against Christians throughout the region. The recent instance of Egyptian army vehicles crushing and killing Coptic Christians protesting against a church burning was merely one of numerous incidents that must make Middle-Eastern Christians wonder about their future under the emerging new regimes.

These trends appear to confirm that despite all the current freedom-and-democracy talk, much of the Islamic world continues to suffer from one particularly severe blind spot when it comes to human liberty. And that concerns the acceptance and protection of authentic religious freedom.

Gregg points out that the Christian population of the Middle East has plummeted since 1900 (when it was about *20 percent*) for ethnic and for political reasons.

Islam confronts two specific dilemmas that raise questions about its ability to accept a robust conception of religious liberty.

First, from its very beginning, Islam was intimately associated with political power. That’s one reason why there is no church-state distinction in Islam that limits (at least theoretically) the state’s capacity to coerce religious belief or unreasonably inhibit religious-shaped choices.

Second, since approximately the 13th century, the dominant theological understanding of God’s nature within Islam has been one of *Voluntas* (Divine Will) rather than *Logos*

(Divine Reason). And this matters because if you believe in a God that can, on a mere whim, act unreasonably, then it isn't so problematic for such a Divinity's adherents to engage in plainly unreasonable practices such as killing apostates.

If, however, God is *Logos*, the case for religious liberty is much easier to make insofar as a reasonable God would never demand compulsion in religion. Why? Because as St. Augustine wrote long ago, "If there is no assent, there is no faith, for without assent one does not really believe."

Gregg sees hope, however, in thinkers like Turkish journalist and devout Muslim Mustafa Akyol, whose recent book [*Islam Without Extremes*](#) makes the Islamic case for religious freedom. Though most Western religious thinkers do little to plead the cause of persecuted Middle Eastern Christians, Gregg thinks the central cause of the persecution, and thus the ultimate solution, is to be found in Islamic thought.

In the end, non-Muslims can't resolve Islam's religious liberty challenge. Only theologically educated, historically informed and believing Muslims can do that. In the meantime, those reading the Arab Spring as a uniformly-positive event might like to consider that it appears to be doing little to secure the freedom, if not the very existence, of ancient Christian churches, many of which were founded by people who in all likelihood knew Christ or his first disciples. The loss of such a civilizational and religious heritage would be immeasurable — and not just for Christianity, but for the future of liberty within the Islamic world itself.

Mustafa Akyol happens to be speaking today at [a luncheon hosted by the Cato Institute](#). Acton's executive director Kris Mauren will be providing commentary. If you are in Washington, D.C., you won't want to miss it!