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Is Islam Good for Government?

By [Matt Cochran](#) | Christian Post Guest Contributor

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After the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, war critics argued that neither country had the proper cultural foundations necessary for democracy to flourish. Conditions in Afghanistan, where American casualties topped 1,650 over the summer of 2011 and the prospect of a functioning, stable democracy is still remote even after a decades-long war, lends credibility to this argument. The State Department also recently left open the possibility of U.S. troops staying on in the country indefinitely. [Iraq](#), although better off than [Afghanistan](#), is hardly the beacon of freedom and democracy that President Bush and his fellow neoconservatives hoped it could be for the Middle East.

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Although critics stopped short of singling out Islam as the reason democracy has failed to take root in both of these countries, the religion has had such a profound influence on both that its culpability for the seemingly intractable standoff between the forces of democracy and extremism should at least be open for debate. Islam could be the single most important reason that Iraq and Afghanistan provide such infertile soil for democracy. Furthermore, if [Islam](#) can be proven to undermine democratic institutions, shouldn't the West be more critical of its encroaching influence in places such as Great Britain and the United States?

Patrick Basham, senior fellow at the CATO institute, a libertarian think tank, made a compelling argument in 2003 for why democracy would prove elusive in Iraq.

Despite progress since then, his argument remains instructive. Basham built his case on four critical cultural factors that he argued must be present for democracy to succeed. Among them were social tolerance, which he defined as "the acceptance of traditionally unpopular minority groups," and secondly, acceptance of the belief that the public should be a participant in political decision-making.

Both of these factors are influenced by religion, whether Islam or Christianity.

Take Christianity and America as an example. Both of Mr. Basham's factors are sacrosanct American values left over from the Judeo-Christian ethos that influenced the founders, even those who also looked to the Enlightenment for inspiration.

Tolerance may not be a word that a worldly 21st century person would use to describe 18th century American [culture](#). In today's vernacular, tolerance means accepting or embracing something. However, a truer definition would be: allowing an activity to go on *despite* one's objection to it; call it coexistence. Christian teachings laid the foundation for a tolerant democratic experiment that – for its time – was very permissive.

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The Pilgrims fled England because they were that “traditionally unpopular minority group” and were persecuted because of it. One could argue that the whole purpose of the American experiment was establishing a more tolerant government. Although many Pilgrims originally dreamed of establishing a Christian utopia in the New World, the American Revolution – in which Puritans fought alongside Baptists and Methodists – forced a compromise that is embodied in the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...” Utopian dreams were superseded by practical considerations and Christians from every sect wanted a guarantee they would be able to live out their convictions without intervention or oversight from the national government. Of course today the U.S. tolerates far more than it did back then, but that is only because the freedom to live out one’s own convictions – within certain bounds – was embedded in the national psyche when America was formed.

In contrast, many Muslim countries utterly fail the tolerance test. The basic freedom to practice a religion of one’s own choosing is a good litmus test. More than 80 percent of Muslims in [Egypt](#), [Pakistan](#), and Jordan believe in executing apostates who leave Islam, according to the Pew Research Centre. [Iran](#) persecutes followers of the Baha’i faith because they are considered apostates from Shi’a Islam.

More consideration should be given to the question of how deeply rooted intolerance is in Islam itself. The Koran *is* used by Muslim-controlled governments to justify the oppression of minority groups. Whether or not an objective reading of the Koran would justify oppression is another matter for a different discussion; the fact remains that the text is the guiding force behind many of the world’s most oppressive regimes.

Mr. Basham’s second factor, public participation in political decision-making, is also a foundational value of American society and one that can be traced back to Christian teachings and principles.

While many Muslims – though not all – believe that the only truly legitimate government would derive its authority from Allah and enforce his commands, the Judeo-Christian view is that government itself is an institution ordained by God, whether or not it is controlled by believers or accomplishes God’s purposes. This is illustrated by Christ’s command to “render to Caesar that which is Caesar’s.” The dominant Christian view is that government is legitimate in its own right. Even Presbyterians and Catholics who subscribe to the view that civil government should move towards enacting the letter of God’s moral law recognize a distinction between civil government and the church. Democracy is still viewed as entirely legitimate. Christians worldwide have almost universally embraced the American model: a form of government that protects their right to practice their religion freely. In practice that means having a voice in public policy.

In contrast, some sects of Islam, such as the Party of Liberation (Hizb ut-Tahrir), preach that participating in secular elections is wrong. In an Aug. 6, 2011, article, *The Economist* magazine acknowledged that many Muslims – among them the Muslim Brotherhood, al Qaeda, and Party of Liberation – dream of a global Islamic caliphate. In this view of government, authority is only legitimate in so far as it follows the Koran.

Historian David Fromkin addresses this issue in his book *A Peace to End All Peace*. He chronicles the miscalculations the British made while plotting to restore the caliphate to Arabia during World War I. The British thought they were planning the installation of a religious leader only. They didn’t realize that in Islam, according to Mr. Fromkin, “all of life, including government and [politics](#), falls within the governance of the Holy Law; so that in the eyes of Sunni Muslims, such as the Ottoman Sultan and the Emir of Mecca, the dominion of the Caliph as upholder of the Holy Law is pervasive. What British Cairo did not see is that the Caliph is also a prince: a governor and a leader in battle as well as a leader in prayer.”

Even Turkey, which is often held up as a model Muslim democracy, is under assault from elements more committed to growing Islam’s influence on government than the secularism championed by its founding father, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who once called himself the “imam of Istanbul” when he served as Istanbul’s mayor, is moving the country closer to other Muslim dictatorships and away from its traditional allies in the West. Tellingly, Erdogan and his Islamist-leaning party, the AKP, are attacking that most democratic of institutions: the media. Reporters Without

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Borders, an organization dedicated to defending press freedoms and reporters, ranks [Turkey](#) 138 out of 178 in their 2010 Press Freedom Index. It has moved down from a ranking of 100 in 2002, the year the AKP took power.

Too many Muslims embrace Islamism, the belief that Islam is not just a religion, but a political system as well. Government leaders in this system of thought are also religious leaders and vice versa.

Participation by the people in the decision-making process is, at best, of secondary importance to having a government that carries out rules dictated by the Koran. Islam undermines Mr. Basham's second prerequisite for democracy in spectacular fashion.

Many troubling questions arise from even a casual consideration of the preceding arguments. If Muslims question the legitimacy of Western democratic government and harbor unspoken desires for a future global Islamic caliphate, should that be cause for concern? To put it another way, if Muslims use the liberty handed down by America's Judeo-Christian-influenced forefathers to advance a religion that does not respect the distinction between civil and religious law, is it hypocrisy for Americans to object to their exercising freedom in that way?

This is not a scholarly exercise based on hypothetical situations. Great Britain is already wrestling with real Muslim influence, and that may be a harbinger of things to come for the U.S. The law itself is under attack by some British Muslims who want family law matters to be handled within the Muslim community. Melanie Philips, in her book *Londonistan*, outlines examples of this type of subversion of Western courts and law. She describes one book published by the Islamic Council of [Europe](#) called *Muslim Communities in Non-Muslim States* that calls for Muslims to organize themselves and build mosques and community centers with the ultimate goal of becoming the majority – and eventually govern the nation according to Islam.

The issue at hand is not whether religion should influence public policy. Christianity, as discussed previously, has had a dramatic and positive impact on the development of governmental systems that protect individual freedoms. The issue is whether Islam's influence is good or bad for Western-style government.

The U.S. Constitution guarantees equal protection under the law. No freedom-loving person should ever undermine that principle, no matter the reason. Muslim Americans have as much a right to participate in the political process as any other religious – or non-religious – persons. Moreover, some Muslim Americans, having fled oppressive religious governments in their home country, are adamantly opposed to the idea of an Islamic caliphate or any movement in that direction, including Sharia courts for local Muslim populations. Political correctness, however, should not stop the West from asking difficult, even uncomfortable, questions of Muslims seeking elected positions or advocating for the isolation of Muslims from the majority culture, which in Britain has resulted in real movement towards a kind of community self-rule that undermines Western values.

Matt Cochran is a writer and communications consultant residing in Atlanta, Georgia. He has broad political experience as a consultant to a congressional and senate campaign, and as a former intern in the Heritage Foundation's Asian Studies Center. He received an economics degree from Georgia State University and a graduate degree from The George Washington University's Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration.

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Give the secularists of the Muslim world enough time and they'll drag Islam, kicking and screaming, into modernity and benign politeness. That's what secularists of the Western world essentially did to Christianity after the Enlightenment. We've had plenty of time to force the church to give up ground to humanism and rationality, though fundies in America have recently been fighting back.

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