

On May 13, my column provided the global history of religious tolerance. On May 20, I charted the history of western religious persecution that led to today's modern values of tolerance. Today's column visits the absence of religious tolerance in the Muslim world and among authoritarian states.

The most interesting case is roiling Muslim-majority countries, countries that enjoyed a brief period of modernization that brought with it (temporarily) secular governance downplaying religion and religion's fanaticism. Muslim apologists claim that Islam is tolerant, recognizing other "people of the book" (Jews and Christians with the bible), who should not be persecuted. These fellow monotheists would be allowed to practice their religions after paying a special tax, a tax avoidable if they converted to Islam.

Seventh century early Muslims knew nothing of other "people of the book," such as the Zoroastrians in Persia (Iran) and Buddhists in Central Asia. They certainly did know that Hindus were not monotheists, and when Muslims overran India, they would have killed them all had there not been so many of them. Islam's record of "tolerance" is pretty thin; their conquests made clear that they were, like the Mafia, making an offer that could not be refused. Convert or die.

For years now, the Foreign Policy establishment has lauded Indonesia, a Muslim majority "democracy" for showing that a modern Muslim country can also be a democracy. In the same way, Turkey has been the model in the Middle East of a democratic Muslim country with secular law. Today we see the backlash: both countries are reverting to Islam's older model.

In Indonesia, a governor was elected several years ago who was Indonesia's second Christian governor and first of Chinese ethnicity. Now, however, this governor has not only lost his re-election, but is now in prison for "blasphemy" (so much for freedom of speech). His blasphemy was contradicting the religious authorities about whether a Muslim could vote for a non-Muslim. The religious reactionaries won. Lest this be thought a fluke, elsewhere in Indonesia, Aceh Province, Shariah prosecutors have condemned two gay men who will each be punished with 80 lashes. In Egypt, only recently reprieved from Muslim Brotherhood rule (and yes, a military dictator is better), the great religious scholars of Al Aqsa University refuse to modernize the rules that give men freedom to divorce a wife by just saying so three times: "divorce, divorce, divorce." President Sisi tried to modernize this law, but the university authorities refuse to take this privilege away from men because the Koran authorizes it. This refusal is strange, considering the insistence by Al Aqsa's president that Islam can be modernized.

Thailand and Burma have no intention of tolerating their Muslim minorities, knowing full well that had Muslims been the majority, they would not tolerate Buddhists.

China is extremely nervous about any kind of religious or cult-like fanaticism. Their leaders know that every revolution in the past (and the chaos that went with them) were religiously organized. To them, national security is more important than religious freedom.

Russia, a once intolerant Christian Russian Empire, became intolerant of openly practiced Christianity when under Communist Rule. With Communism gone, the old Church has come back and its history of bigotry reinstated. Even sects as tepid as Christian Science or Seventh-Day Adventist are now banned. Perhaps Mormon missionaries will be banned next.

The most frightening example of murderous religious fervor is being exposed in Iraq, where ISIS took captive children from the Yazidi religious minority and systematically brainwashed them. They starved them (some as young as 7) into fighting over a single tomato and told them that in paradise they can eat to their hearts' delight after blowing themselves up with suicide belts. Escapees from these camps are whistle blowing. This process reminds me of when the Persian Cult of the Assassins in the 10th century fed captives with opium and seduced them with beautiful women. After they woke, they were told that they had visited paradise, a paradise that would welcome them after they died for the cult.

It is amazing how old this snake oil is.

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